

The Following Wind

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The Garnett family live in a flat in Glasgow. John, the eldest son, is engaged to the conventional Ailsa Craig who lives in the flat below. To her the Garnetts are that 'insufferable family' upstairs, who do all the right things in the wrong way. In a fit of pique she breaks her engagement, and presently John meets, loves and is loved in return by Flora Mure, who has been introduced into the family by his younger brother Bruce.

It is in the inter-play of their conflicting personalities and problems that the interest of this poignant and unusually perceptive novel lies.

By N. Brysson Morrison

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BREAKERS

SOLITAIRE

THE GOWK STORM

WHEN THE WIND BLOWS

THE STRANGERS

THESE ARE MY FRIENDS

THE WINNOWING YEARS

THE HIDDEN FAIRING



THE FOLLOWING WIND

A Novel by
N. BRYSSON MORRISON



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To
JOHN MACFARLANE
lawyer and friend

Chapter One

THE car began its winding journey downhill. On a clear day from here, mountain peak and shoulder of ben could be seen, distance making them look like the islands of the blest, but to-day everything was hazed with rain. No clamouring, screaming train broke the steady stillness. John had a memory of a pewit wheeling above a stubble field, its breast white against the greyness of the skv.

The bald uncomplicated scenery of knoll, field and tree rolled from either side of the road. In the country, rain did not make the commonplace cheerless as it did in the city to which they were returning. Here it intensified the greens into a Noah's Ark brightness, strung every fence with beads, made the hedges glitter and tremble, and flew brightly before the wind in slanting darts.

Perhaps it was because he had been born and lived for most of his life in a city flat that the countryside had this effect on John, an effect that always gave him a shock of d'ighted surprise, as though each time he came new to it. Knoll, field and tree could never be commonplace to h'm. Even on a day such as this he felt exhilarated, saw radiance in rain, caught the gleam of hail. On their father's funeral day, he was glad they had left him in what could still be described as a country churchyard.

'Don't, Bruce,' he stopped his brother as he saw his hand make for the pocket which held the ubiquitous cigarette-case.

'Why not?' demanded Bruce, but his hand went

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no further. 'Because it doesn't look well smoking coming from a funeral? Look well before whom? Do you think I care what anyone thinks?'

'No, I don't,' John informed him shortly. 'But you wouldn't do it if father were here.'

He had heard Lennie, their sister, say not so long ago, 'Where are they? People like ourselves, I mean.' They had been at their father's funeral, elderly for the most part, strong of nose, unperplexed eyes looking from under veined brows, their hair fine as silk like Mr. Matthew Wylie's or a grizzled crop like Mr. Latimer's.

John was glad they had all been there: their father had been followed to the end by his own. 'People like ourselves'—was it a breed that was dying out?

'Look, Bruce,' he said once the car reached streets made restless with traffic, 'father's death is behind us now. His war has ended.'

'As Mrs. Boag says,' said Bruce, referring to their daily help, 'it's a blessed release.' His sarcasm tore the words to shreds.

'Yes, for him it's a blessed release,' agreed John. He found himself, when talking to Bruce, deliberately tempering his words. That, he supposed, was the effect of the other's exaggeration, his angry over-statements.

'You sound just like those In Memoriam notices in the papers,' said Bruce. 'Pop had years of it, and all we can say, once it's all over, is no more suffering, no more pain.'

'All I'm saying,' returned John, 'is that it's behind him now. Pop wouldn't want us to carry it like a burden into the future.'

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The gap of ten years between the brothers separated them as though they belonged to different generations. John realised why. He had been through the war, whereas the younger had been growing up during it. He had hoped that Bruce's term of national service would have knocked off some of his corners, taught him to rub shoulders with different types and conditions. But Bruce had returned home as bristlingly intolerant as he had left it, with that touchiness about him of one angry to find himself in the world at all.

The car drew up outside their home in a street of grey dwellings built as houses and flats. Some belonged to a period of good architecture with smooth façades and horizontal roofs. Those of a later date broke the skyline with attics and stone balustrades, their frontage prominent with bay and oriel windows. All were substantial, well built, attached to each other with no division between the two periods or between house and flat. The narrow town gardens in front lent, in perspective, a sampler-like precision to the street. Above, the overcast sky had begun to ripen between buildings and behind roofs.

The Street—John could remember it as early as he could remember anything. It lay in his mind as entire as life itself, with the University at one end and, at the other, like a drop-scene, distant green hills, the sky for ever flying above it. Even as a child, with his feet on the pavement, he had been conscious of the sky, because they lived in the top flat. The first thing he could remember was mammoth clouds, bearing light, blowing past. What he saw from ground level was of course everyone's sky and was quite different

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from what he saw billowing past their windows. That belonged only to him.

Bruce bolted into the close whenever the car stopped, as though he had not a moment to spare. He was in such a hurry that by the time his elder brother began to climb the stairs he heard him entering their home.

John felt no urge for such excessive speed. Indeed the higher he climbed, the less urgent he felt. His intuition was confirmed when he reached the second landing.

The Craigs' door was wide open, framing Ailsa, the girl to whom he was engaged. She stood back when she saw him, and something in that gesture, implying as it did that he was to enter, irritated him.

Their long engagement had had the effect of most long engagements: they were like company commanders who might still be in the same camp but whose liaison had now reached straining-point as they waited for the battle to be joined. Both were on the defensive, not with the enemy but with each other, neither prepared to concede an inch lest personal prestige be lost.

'I can't stay,' he told her, entering the hall. 'I must go upstairs. Mother—all of them will be waiting.'

She shut the door behind him and stood with her back to it. The effort not to say, 'Don't be afraid, I won't keep you—I never do, do I?' revealed itself on her face. Well groomed, she was good-looking rather than pretty, and two years older than he, a fact she was the only person to remember as she was over-conscious of it.

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‘Why aren’t you upstairs?’ he enquired. ‘What went wrong?’

It was her turn to be on the defensive, because he was taking for granted something had gone wrong. All he wanted was to be told about it, then he would feel free to go. Since that was his desire, she would gratify it.

‘You had no sooner all left than you’ll never guess what Lennie did—went into her room and locked the door.’

Her voice rather than her words told him what she thought of this enormity.

‘Well, what’s so wrong with that?’ he countered, man-like seeing the obvious. ‘She wanted to be alone, that’s all.’

‘You would say “that’s all.” You always minimise everything.’

Hurriedly he inserted, ‘It would be a comfort for mother having you.’

‘I made tea for Mrs. Garnett,’ said Ailsa, careful to let his remark pass without comment. ‘But I could see it was such an effort for her to answer me that I came away. After all, you can’t sit in the same room with a person and not speak to them.’

You can if you’re a Garnett, John found himself thinking. She thought the same thing at the identical moment. That insufferable family upstairs, who did all the wrong things in the right way and the right things in the wrong. They were the enemy, the common enemy. Once she and John were married, she would see the widest possible distance stretched between them and his family.

‘And even if you aren’t going into mourning,’ her

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expression conveyed what she thought of this, 'was it necessary for Lennie to wear her Hungarian jacket at the service?'

'But it's black,' he pointed out.

'Don't be silly, John. How can anything be called black with all that bright embroidery on it?'

'Pop always liked her in that,' he said wonderingly, not quite sure yet where Lennie had gone wrong.

'Well, what about the funeral?' she asked impatiently. She wished she did not need to feel she had always to dig everything out of him.

'It went all right,' he heard himself say lamely.

'Dr. Gentles took the service well.'

The banal words fell from him because he could not tell her about the elm-trees shaken with wind and rooks, the wild wetness of everything, and that intense green that is only seen in old graveyards.

'And what did you do—at the end?'

'Do?' he repeated vaguely, as he prepared himself to front her criticism. 'We—Bruce and I shook hands with everyone.'

Unnecessary to tell Ailsa that, after it was all over, he had told Bruce in undertones to stand beside him at the gate and thank each for coming as he shook hands. Again he heard Bruce's voice crack between his teeth, 'Thank them for coming! Whose funeral is this? Ours or theirs?' And his own retort, 'Neither. It happens to be father's.'

'You didn't make any excuse, give an explanation why you hadn't asked them back to the house?'

'No. I didn't feel that was necessary. They didn't seem to expect it, Ailsa. I don't think people go in for

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that kind of things nowadays to the extent they used to do.'

'You mean you don't go in for it. But you're a law unto yourselves. I can assure you it's the first funeral any of us has ever heard of where no one was invited back to the house.' By any of us she meant her own family, and its ramifications of Craig aunt, uncle and cousin. 'I'm sure that was what everyone who was there was thinking.'

'Well, let them think.' The words broke from him as though he were Bruce. With a dogged effort, he pulled himself up. 'You know it was out of the question to ask anyone back.'

'Why? Who put it out of the question? You didn't want them back and you didn't have them. That's the long and the short of it. Not even Dr. Gentles. He must think it most odd. He'll be calling within a day or two, of course.'

'Whatever will he be calling for?'

'Because the minister always calls after a funeral,' she said flatly, 'that's why.'

The only member who could have kept the Garnetts right about such matters was the head of the house. Ailsa had always liked Mr. Garnett better than his wife—she might know it was correct for a minister to call after a funeral, but she would not care if he omitted to do so.

She looked into John Garnett's face. He was not particularly handsome, but his eyes were well spaced and he had a nice mouth. She met better-looking men every week of her life, yet the fact remained that she did not want a better-looking man. She wanted him, because she was in love with him.

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With marriage she would be giving up a good post as buyer in one of the few large Glasgow shops remaining in private hands. The sacrifices would, therefore, all be on her side, whose interests were not the housewife's but those of the assured business woman accustomed to the stimulation of travel and contacts. Yet below her interests were instincts, none the less strong because they were buried.

Now as she saw the face of the man she loved white under the electric light, he reminded her of what he had been when she knew him first. When the eldest son of the family upstairs returned home, invalided out of the army. She had watched them set out for a motor run in the country—they had all struck her then as attractive, gay, unusual. It had been a simple matter to offer to sit beside Mr. Garnett should Mrs. Garnett wish to join the next outing. Not that her offers of help had ever been accepted. The Garnetts were neither takers nor givers. But after that it had grown into a habit to go upstairs to see not Mr. Garnett but his son.

'I have to go to London to-morrow,' she said. 'I'm flying.' In this softened mood towards him, her words were not edged with implication. She should have gone to London to-day, but had postponed her journey until after the funeral—not that there had been much point in doing that as things had fallen out. 'I won't be back until the twenty-seventh.'

Involuntarily he relaxed where he stood beside her. He would be free then, until the twenty-seventh. Only now did he realise that he eyed her door speculatively each time on his way upstairs, as he wondered if he would get past without its opening.

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'Are you, Ailsa? The twenty-seventh—I'll see you that evening then.'

His sigh of relief reached her, probably because he was over-tired and so off his guard. And in that unwarded moment, as his gaze met hers, he knew that it had.

With the nakedness of what they both knew separating them, he felt it would be a blunder to kiss her, while she wished to God he had at least made the attempt to cover it up. Instead she heard him say:

'I'd better go upstairs now. Until the twenty-seventh then, Ailsa.'

The higher he climbed, the brighter it became because of the pointed glass roof on top of the building. The light fell on his upturned face in slants as he mounted the stairs. Bruce had left the door ajar for him: he pushed it open and entered.

The hall was basically the same as the one downstairs, the same good shape, the same number of doors, in the identical positions, yet because of the difference in their furniture and background there always struck John, even now, as something unfamiliar about the one below. Everything about the Craigs was comfortable, solid, as it should be. They even still had their maid, Jessie, whom they had brought with them when they came to Mountview Street.

The light through the hinges of the half-opened doors striped and slit the semi-darkness of the unlit hall John now entered. What furniture it held was good but had seen better days. So had the elaborate stuccoed cornice round the ceiling and the ornamentation from which the electric light flex hung. Other-

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wise it had rather a bare, stripped appearance after the padded, brown-toned comfort of the one downstairs. This bareness made prominent the electric meter that hung high on one wall and, still higher on another, the disused bell system, relic of the past when there were servants to answer bells.

As John crossed the hall he noticed petals from the wreaths and sprays still strewn upon the floor. If Ailsa had been allowed to stay, he knew she would have had them brushed up by the time he and Bruce came home. Not that he objected to them: they were like white tears.

He went into the sitting-room, because that was where his mother would be. The nostalgically sweet smell of flowers scented the air as strongly as though they were still there. It was a large room, the largest in the house, with five french windows forming an oriel and a big window at the side. Because the flat was at a corner and so high, this room always seemed full of sky, swimming with light. The drawing-room in the days when there were such things, vestiges of past glories still clung to it, but it was now a living-room. During the war, when heating and lighting became problems, everyone else had shut up their 'big' room, except the Garnetts, for the simple reason it was the one they liked best in the house.

His mother was standing at the front windows. She glanced round as he entered, her eyes wincing as though she found the light too bright. They were tired with lack of sleep, not because of weeping: now he came to think of it, he had never once seen their mother cry.

'You're back, dear?' she said. She came and sat

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beside him: her face looked drained as though it had been wrung out.

'Yes,' he answered, 'we're back. The service was beautiful. I wonder if it's because it's so old that the graveyard's always so peaceful, despite its country unkemptness.' So old that it was closed now: they had a lair there because their father's people had once lived in Drumban. The thought jerked through his mind, only mother will be able to be buried there now. 'Mr. Grant was at Drumban, waiting for us.'

Each side of Mr. Niall Grant's face was different from the other, so that his photographs in the newspapers could belong only to him. That was why the shipbuilder was familiar to John, who had seen him only once before and that a long time ago. He had been a small boy with his father in Buchanan Street station, he remembered, when they had met Mr. Grant on his way to his Perthshire home. God, he thought now, Pop must have been about my age then: and somehow this realisation assailed him with the force of shock.

'Was he?' He could see she was listening with the concentration of the exhausted.

'I offered him a cord. After all, he is related.'

'Connected—yes. That was right.' She furrowed the arm of her chair with her finger. 'Did he say anything about his wife?'

'Yes, at the end, when he bade me good-bye. He said she had told him to invite me to Rannick the week-end after next.'

Startled, she looked at him, her finger still on the arm of the chair, as though pointing.

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'Did she? You'd like to go, wouldn't you?'

'I asked if Bruce could go instead of me.'

'You shouldn't have done that, John. You need a change more than Bruce.'

'He's jumpier than I am. I didn't want to sound ungracious, so I said it would be difficult for me to get away as I had a lot of arrears to make up at the office. Which is true.'

'Yes,' she said, 'they've been most considerate. Everyone has been most considerate.'

For a minute or two they sat and looked at each other as they both thought of the man who had been buried that afternoon.

'Things were as he wanted them to be,' he said at last, as though reminding her of something. 'He remained at home, he didn't go to hospital or a nursing-home—even at the end.'

'Yes,' she agreed, 'that was what he wanted—to be at home. He once said to me he wondered if it were fair to Lennie and Bruce.' John knew what her answer would be to that: their mother had always put their father first. She was not so much a pelican depriving herself for her young, but an eagle battling beside her mate. 'He was far enough away at the end without that.'

Something seemed to pluck at her face; she rose suddenly and came behind him. She was not demonstrative but he felt her kiss his cheek. He knew he meant more to her at this time than either Bruce or Lennie because he, the eldest son, could remember their father when he was his age. He could, therefore, travel back with her further into the past than her younger children, whose memory of their parent was

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bound to be coloured by his last years, when he was taut with pain, irritable, bad-tempered. Iris, the eldest of the family, had married a Pole during the war and was now in Canada. At least that was where she had been when they last heard from her—two years ago. Iris was a sore subject in the family.

Bruce and Lennie came into the room together. She was the youngest of the family, not yet twenty-one, but the very way she wore her clothes set her apart from her contemporaries. The controversial thick cardigan, fastened up to her neck, and pencil-slim black skirt acted like foils to the delicacy of her colouring. Everything about her was finely drawn, as though the instrument of her body were resilient because of its very capacity for resistance. Both she and Bruce took after their father's side of the house in that they were tall, whereas Iris and John were dark and of medium height. But none of her children had their mother's olive skin which gave her a foreign look.

'I've offended Ailsa, John,' Lennie began at once. Any fragility in her appearance was belied, the moment she opened her mouth, by the force with which she spoke. 'She came and actually tried the handle of my door. I'm sorry about it; but I find it so difficult to be what Ailsa expects me to be, because I just haven't a clue what that is.'

'These people at the funeral,' stated Bruce, 'they gave me quite a turn—I'd forgotten half of them. They were like people you'd once dreamed about.'

'I know what you mean,' said Lennie. Her eyes were over-bright but, like her mother, there were no

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traces of tears. 'They were like people out of your subconscious.'

'It was good of Alan to come, as well as his father,' remarked their mother. She referred to Alan Latimer whom Iris had jilted when she married her Polish airman.

'So like Iris not being here at such a moment,' said Lennie, 'leaving us all to deal with her backwash.'

'He wouldn't have come if she had been,' pointed out Bruce. 'That Mr. Grant—curious face he has, both sides quite different. Gives him a displaced look—as though he came from another star where all their faces are like that. He's like something off a mural.'

'He asked me to spend the week-end after next with them,' announced John. 'I've too many arrears to make up, so I said you'd go. You're to be at his office round about five on the Friday, and he'll take you back with him.'

Bruce looked at him from under drawn brows, as he tried to make up his mind about this.

'I can't go,' he said flatly at last. 'I haven't a decent dressing-gown for one thing. That thing I wear would scare the staff at Rannick House out of their wits.'

'They're easily scared,' Lennie commented in her flipping way. 'They would just think you were a devotee of Gandhi.'

'Well, since that's all that's keeping you, buy a new one,' rapped out John.

'A dressing-gown's an extravagance,' Bruce said in an injured voice. 'You know I haven't got a penny for extravagances.'



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'All you appear to have a penny for is cigarettes,' remarked Lennie.

'Heavens, I'll give you the money for a new one,' John said impatiently. 'But that doesn't mean *carte blanche*,' he warned, 'don't go putting it down to an account.'

'Think of thinking it necessary to say that to someone who hasn't got a penny for extravagances,' said Lennie.

The University chimes were flung against the windows by the wind.

'It has been gusty to-day,' she remarked. 'Everything in the flat has been squeaking.'

'I noticed for the first time, when I was waiting for John, that it's spring,' put in their mother. For the past months her vision had been restricted to a sick-room: beyond that the cycle of the year had passed unheeded.

Lennie moved over to the window to look out. She stared below at the street to see that spring had come. At this height the trees looked twig-like: they had begun to mist with green and early blossom sprayed like a fountain against drab stone.

With only a pane of glass between them, she heard the winds buffeting against the window. Suddenly she was overwhelmingly conscious of the house where she had lived all her life stretching empty as a shell behind her. The furniture with which it was filled struck her as of as little portent as milestones that, instead of measuring distance, stood in a meaningless group. Empty as a shell even the tide had left—that was what it was.

She turned to face them all.

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'Let's get out of here,' she said, and her voice rose on an unwonted note. 'Let's leave here, and never come back. There's nothing to tie us here now, nothing. Let's go somewhere else. Anywhere, so long as it's away from here.'

Chapter Two

THEIR mother and Lennie left for St. Andrews a day or two later. That was where the Garnetts used to spend their holidays when they went as a family. No one troubled about memories: it was the easiest place to arrange at such short notice.

The house seemed odd, unusual, free, when the brothers found themselves alone in it that night. They kept all the doors open and Bruce went whistling from room to room, his hands in his pockets. John asked him if he had turned off the immerser after his bath, but Bruce could not remember. Since he was in bed, John had to go to see.

'You hadn't,' he informed him on his return. 'Wait till you get married and have to pay your own bills. Then you'll begin and remember things like that.'

Bruce was lying on his back, his hands behind his head, staring up at the ceiling where the cracks made a map. He looked clean, comfortable and contented, his eyes bright with sleep, as only a child's brighten. They shared a room, to the back of the building, which was the shabbiest in the house. Because the flat, where he had lived all his married life, was rented, their father had been reluctant to expend more than was necessary on what he termed the fabric. 'The boys' room' was always the last to be considered, and when it was, was postponed until next year. Neither of its occupants saw anything wrong with it, they liked it as it was—as they remembered it. Its annual spring-cleaning was quite enough of an upheaval for them.

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'Pass me a cigarette,' Bruce said sleepily.

'I'll do nothing of the kind,' retorted John. 'If you want one, you can get up for it yourself.' He knew Bruce would rather do without than rouse himself from his pleasurable drowsiness.

'You might,' Bruce said peaceably, 'I'd do it for you. Where's the point of getting married? As you say, all that would bring you is bills. You can get what you want without marriage and without bills. Any girl—and it doesn't matter what her class.' The telegraphic words tapped themselves out between lips that hardly moved.

Involuntarily the elder brother looked at the younger. Had Bruce—? There had been plenty of opportunity, when he was doing his national service for instance. Besides, 'that kind of thing' made its own opportunity.

'Don't be alarmed,' Bruce woke up to say. He yawned strenuously. 'I just couldn't be bothered—that's all.'

'Well, you take my advice and go on not bothering until you fall in love,' John said roundly. 'Then you'll want to get married.'

Bruce jerked his head to look at him.

'Not I,' he repudiated. 'One is as likely as the other, because there's no such thing as falling in love. It's all moonshine, poet's poppycock. That's why they make such a song about it—because it never comes true. Psychologists would say it was a form of wish fulfilment.'

He returned his attention to the cracks mapped on the ceiling above him. That was his treasure island up there. He knew every river by heart, and had since

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he was a schoolboy. It did not matter when John snapped out the light, he could still see the island bright as daylight.

John lay awake after his brother's even breathing told him he was asleep. Was Bruce right when he said there was no such thing as falling in love? Certainly what John felt for Ailsa and Ailsa felt for him was not poet's poppycock with moonshine upon it. Then where had it gone, that ecstasy, that passion, which had surged through and charged him when he had been Bruce's age?

Perhaps it was inevitable that the wild tumult of life's rhythm should settle into a humdrum tempo. When you made-do with half-baked emotions, you forgot about the whole cheese. Instead of everything being larger than life, you grew so accustomed to its falling always that little bit short that you began to take for granted it always would. The difference between him and Bruce was that he had once expected life to measure up, whereas Bruce had no expectations about it whatsoever.

A few days later, when he found himself alone in the flat, John was reminded of the time he had returned home from the army: ordinary household sounds had seemed blessed to him then as he lay in bed listening to them,

Now when he heard them again, moving about the empty house, they still struck him as blessed, the blessedness of everyday that had nothing humdrum about it. It was bound up with the shining security of a child, at home in an unfamiliar world. Someone emptying their rubbish at the back and the rattle of the ash-bin lid as they replaced it. A message-boy

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clattering his way down the stone stairs, the thud when he reached each landing. Mrs. Kennedy, through the wall, raking out her fire. The noise of the school near-by at mid-morning break when the children ran storming into the playground.

Nothing sounded quite as it should, because the flat, boxed in with stone, acted like a sounding-board. The tin lid might have been a cymbal, the message-boy a runaway barrel bumping downstairs. The sound of Mrs. Kennedy raking her fire was intimate enough to be taking place in your head, the roar of the children, attenuated by distance, like the ebb and flow of the sea.

A milk-cart jangled by, and the clip-clop of the horse's hooves brought the country down the city street. In the sitting-room he heard the winds pipe, fife and drum, like the gathering of the clans in a Glasgow chimney.

He remembered again how Lennie used to come into his room each morning after breakfast, to sit on his bed and read out the text to him from the front page of the *Glasgow Herald*, what she called his daily uplift. Lennie had been in her teens then, but there was nothing of the teenager about her. She had never gone in for sling-back shoes, head scarves and shoulder-bags. It had naturally always been Iris and John in the past, but Iris was no longer at home. John felt as though Lennie had adopted him. She was totally different from her much older sister: for one thing, she had a maturity about her the experimenting Iris had never achieved.

He had remained at home to-day to go through his father's belongings. He wanted to have every-

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thing despatched, arranged, provided for before his mother returned. It took him longer than he had anticipated, and it was late afternoon before he reached intimate possessions, such as the contents of his parent's desk and his pocket-book.

Light washed from the west and played upon the windows, webbing and honeycombing the walls of the sitting-room. The wallet had been an expensive one which had worn well, was old without being shabby. Everything about it reminded John of his father, the easy way it opened, its smell, like a fragrance, of good leather and cigarettes exclusive as cigars.

His brow furrowed as he emptied it, these pathetic mementoes of the dead: a snapshot of Lennie as a little girl screwing up her eyes in the sunshine; a letter from Iris when she had once been away on his birthday—how many birthdays since then had she allowed to pass without keeping tryst; a war office telegram referring to Second Lieutenant John Garnett; a page torn from a railway diary by one who had made his last journey; a well-filled stamp-book—their father had been the only one in the house ever to have stamps.

It was very slim now it was emptied: John put his finger into the innermost pocket to feel if he had found everything. There was something else, something like a fishing-cast which his father used to roll up neatly in his methodical way. It was only when his son had brought it out between his finger and thumb that he saw it, was a lock of woman's hair.

He stood looking down at it, as startled as though what lay on the palm of his hand was alive, like a bird.

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A woman's—it might be a child's, one of his own children's, only Iris and he were dark, and it was neither Lennie's nor Bruce's. This was not the down of a baby's first hair, but fair with that sheen of gold upon it that has not a trace of red.

It could never have belonged to their mother, who was gypsy dark. Some woman perhaps his father had loved before he married: it must have been more than a lad and lass affair for him to have kept a lock of her hair in his pocket-book all these years. He could not have forgotten it was there: it would not have been there had he been going to forget.

John wondered what he should do with it. The fantastic notion passed through his mind of placing it on his father's grave when he next went to Drumban. Somehow he felt the lock of hair would be at home in that graveyard with its birds' nests, spiders' webs netting the twigs of bushes, and keepsake epitaphs. But he dismissed the idea almost at once, as though it were disloyal to his mother.

He heard Bruce's key in the lock and shouted to him where he was. Bruce came in with his coat still on and his hat pushed to the back of his handsome head. Tall and broad shouldered, he made his elder brother look smaller and slighter than he really was.

'What are you doing?' he demanded.

'Seeing to Pop's things,' replied John. He shut the wallet with decision after putting back the lock of hair where he had found it, and slipped it into his pocket. 'I've finished now. Bruce, do you mind if I take Pop's wallet?'

'Yes, do,' said Bruce, watching him. 'He would like you to have it, to use it, just as he used to do. He

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had a place for everything, hadn't he?'

'Yes, he had a place for everything,' agreed John, and he thought, even for things we knew nothing about. 'I'd a man out to-day to measure this room. I'm getting a stove put in here.'

'Whatever are you doing that for?' asked Bruce.

'Because it's so easy to heat this tiny room in winter, especially when you can get coal for the whistling,' John said dryly.

'I don't think Lennie will like a stove in here,' announced Bruce.

'You mean you don't think you will. Well, you're going to have it, as it keeps in all night. That means this room, which is like an ice palace in winter, will never be cold, and when it's open it's just like sitting at an ordinary fire.'

The old-fashioned fireplace was festive when lit, but most of the heat was drawn up the vast chimney. The younger Garnetts, therefore, did not sit on chairs but crouched, knelt or sat, like worshippers, on the hearthrug, within the orbit of warmth.

John supposed Ailsa was right—they, he and his family, were a bit odd. Well, he liked them like that.

'What's Mrs. Boag got in the bowl for us to-night, do you think?' asked Bruce.

Mrs. Boag was the daily help who 'gave' the Garnetts two hours from nine to eleven. She belonged to the generation who believed that men, when it came to 'doing' for themselves, were handless as well as headless. Where the Garnett brothers were concerned, she was not far wrong. Each day, therefore, she left what she called 'their dinner' in various pots and pans and bowls, with the time limit tied on the

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handles. She told all her other 'parties' what she had prepared for her two single gentlemen, what she had put into their meat roll, how she had steamed it at her own home and left it in the Garnett kitchen to be popped in the oven for a heat-up—everything made as simple as Mrs. Boag could make it.

'I saw her this morning,' said John, 'and told her not to bother preparing anything for us. Let's go out to-night and have a really good meal.'

'Let's,' agreed Bruce from his heart. 'Do you think it's because everything that comes out of Mrs. Boag's bowl is the same shape that makes it taste exactly the same?'

The sound of the door-bell suddenly pierced throughout the house.

'Who'll that be at this hour?' Bruce asked indignantly. Any hour was the wrong one for a visitor on Bruce's clock.

'The sooner you answer, the sooner you'll know,' said John.

He heard a man's voice when Bruce opened the front door and recognised it as that of Dr. Gentles, come to pay his courtesy call. Bruce brought him into the sitting-room in record time. Ministers were not in his line: when he had reached the customary age for such things, he had refused to join the church. Even Dr. Gentles had been unable to 'catch' him.

Their visitor belied his name, being a short vigorous looking man with an exceptionally fine head. The set of his shoulders, the thrust of his chin, the challenge of his glance—everything about him bespoke the fighter.

'How good of you coming up all these stairs,' John

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said. Because the minister was sturdy-looking made one forget he was getting on. He plugged in the electric fire as Dr. Gentles squarely seated himself.

'Bruce was saying your mother and Lennie are at St. Andrews. Any word from Iris yet?'

'Not yet. We've cabled every address we've had of hers in Canada, but it's over two years since we've heard from her. The funny thing is our letters don't come back to us. That looks as though they were being forwarded on to her somewhere.'

'She'll be in Poland. In a schloss or a slum,' contributed Bruce. 'They say all the Poles over here during the war were either aristocrats or the lowest of the low. That should suit Iris down to the ground. She just hated betwixts and betweenes.'

John wished he would be quiet. He suddenly felt constrained where the minister was concerned, as though they merely made use of him, at funerals and such-like. Not only had Iris married a Pole, but she had changed her religion to his. What with Bruce and Iris, John wondered Dr. Gentles had any interest left in the family.

'Now, Dr. Gentles,' he began, 'we can make tea for you, only it's a 'ong process, and promise you won't tell Lennie what china you get. I don't know what's kitchen and what's not. So what about calling it a day and having sherry?'

He had no sooner made this suggestion than the awful thought struck him: suppose all ministers were temperance? It was as though he felt Ailsa at his side. But he breathed again when Dr. Gentles said he had imbibed rather a lot of tea that afternoon, and sherry would be a nice change.

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Ailsa was still at John's side as he left the room for the sherry. Was this not the twenty-seventh? If it were, then this must be the day she was returning from London. He glanced at the newspaper still in the hall, to confirm the date—yes, it was the twenty-seventh.

As he was about to enter the room with the sherry and glasses bouncing about on a too-large tray, he heard Bruce's not-to-be-won voice saying:

'I don't see how you make that out. All Pop went through led him to a hole in Drumban cemetery. We'll stick a stone on top of him to mark where we put him, and that's the end of that.'

His voice was both dogmatic and aggressive. None of the Garnetts was a particularly devout church-goer unless perhaps Lennie, but Bruce had all the non-church member's characteristic of holding a minister responsible for his disbelief. Well, John supposed Dr. Gentles could look after himself. Dr. Gentles could—and Bruce too.

'Stop thinking of death as a hole in the ground, Bruce,' he advised. 'It's not even an horizon, for an horizon is but the limit of one's sight. You can watch a ship disappear into the sky, can't you? When she fades out of sight, you say, "There she goes!" But it is only out of your sight that she has faded. Although you can't see her, you know perfectly well that ship is still sailing on, as undiminished as ever. On the other side, people will be watching for her and saying, "Here she comes!"'

'You're not likely to make me believe what Pop didn't believe,' said Bruce, his voice brusque with awkwardness. 'Oh, I know he went to church—on

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and off, before he got too ill. But he didn't believe what you've been trained to believe.'

'It has nothing to do with training, Bruce. Certainly it was more difficult for your father, because he had the scientific type of mind that rationalises everything. But I remember he once said to me that there were some things you should take as proven—like milestones someone else had put up by the way. If you follow them, one day you will find yourself at your destination.'

Bruce's eyes glinted as he surveyed him. He was out to shock.

'Well, I don't believe there is a destination,' he announced.

Robustly Dr. Gentles surveyed him back.

'Don't you? That's a pity, as you won't recognise the way or know when you arrive. And in these scientific days one's journey is one's destination. When I flew back from America last year, it took longer than usual on the way. They told us that was because something had happened that rarely ever did—the prevailing wind from the west had failed. Well, Bruce, you and each one of us have a following wind behind us that can't fail, that will carry us across every horizon, from the known to the unknown.'

'Never felt the slightest puff from it,' Bruce informed him.

'I don't wonder,' replied Dr. Gentles. 'You're too busy cruising about on your own just now, but when something happens you won't be so happy. Then my advice to you would be lean back—lean back hard, if you don't want to find yourself grounded.'

'What was he calling on us for?' Bruce demanded

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of John once their visitor had taken his leave.

'A minister always calls after a funeral,' answered John, trading on Ailsa's information. 'Look, Bruce, I've just remembered this is the twenty-seventh—the day Ailsa's coming back. I'll need to phone Mrs. Craig to find out when they expect her home.'

Mrs. Craig said eight o'clock—that meant he would have time to have a meal with Bruce in town. He could hear Ailsa's mother was hurt that no Garnett had told her their mother and Lennie had gone to St. Andrews. If only she had known, she said, John and Bruce could have come downstairs for breakfast, or Bessie would have come upstairs to make it for them. At this juncture Bruce took over the phone from John, to tell her the pathetic story of all he had been through each morning, not only preparing but assembling breakfast. Mrs. Craig was fond of Bruce: as for Bessie, she would have let any Craig go to the wall for him.

'We're to go downstairs for breakfast to-morrow—eight o'clock,' he announced triumphantly as he put down the receiver. 'Think of having properly made toast and everything on the table at the same time, instead of getting up and having to hunt for it.'

'We'd better go into town now,' said John, 'since I must be back by eight.'

The two brothers walked down Mountview Street. Vagrant spring sunshine lit up the trees, making their early green unearthly against the cold grey of house and pavement, so that for these few minutes the trees, for all their rootless appearance, were the realities in this world of stone.

Roberto's was an unpretentious building at the

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humbler end of one of Glasgow's principal shopping streets, but inside it was bright with an air of expectancy, festive with the savoury smells of good cooking, and dramatic with the sense of rendezvous. Here waiters did not wait so much as minister. Bruce felt better before he was upstairs, restored by the time he had taken off his coat, regaled when he sat down.

'Just the two of you, Mr. Garnett?' enquired the waiter, and when John replied, 'Just two, Bernardo,' he removed the extra places set at the table for four.

'Now, Bernardo,' said Bruce, 'my brother's paying for it, so we want everything that opens and shuts, with a cork and without a cork. Let's have the wine-list first.'

He chose a spectacular dinner, ably assisted by Bernardo, after which he and John were free to look about them, to discuss everyone who came in, for they were early and the place almost empty. They sat side by side on one of the seats cushioned like a railway carriage, with their backs to the wall. It was the best table in the room, so situated that from it could be seen every thing that was going on, yet in a corner which gave its occupants a feeling of seclusion.

After John had ordered a third, or it might be a fourth, round of coffee, Bruce said to him, 'Do you know this? Everyone in this place has changed since we've been here.'

'Not everyone surely,' expostulated John.

'Everyone,' confirmed Bruce with unnecessary emphasis, so positive was he. 'The girl in the red dress for instance. Where's she gone?'

'The girl in the red dress?' repeated John, looking round for her. 'Yes, she must have gone. That's

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someone else sitting in her seat. Someone quite different. She's in a different hat.'

'That's not a hat she's wearing,' Bruce said argumentatively, 'that's just the handle of a basket. I didn't think she was all that hot myself, did you?'

'Who?' demanded John.

'The girl in the red dress of course.'

'It's only been her dress that has made you think she was hot at all,' said John.

Bruce thought this the funniest joke he had ever heard.

'Do you know this, Bernardo,' John confided to the waiter when he returned with more coffee, 'we've made a discovery. Everyone in this place has changed—except you.'

'We can prove it to you,' said Bruce, wagging his finger at him for confirmation, 'because the girl in the red dress has gone.'

'I'm afraid you'll both have to go once you've drunk your coffee,' Bernardo told them.

'Why ever should we?' John asked with some indignation.

'Because it's closing time, Mr. Garnett. Don't you see the place is emptying?'

'But it's ridiculous to close at this hour,' protested John.

'Absolutely ridiculous,' Bruce backed him up.

'Let me get you a taxi, sir,' suggested the waiter.

Neither John nor Bruce could get over that. One would really think Bernardo imagined they were strangers to Glasgow instead of having lived there all their lives! They discussed it as they went downstairs, leaning close together so that no one would hear them,

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although the place was now as empty as when they had arrived. They were still discussing it when they reached the pavement outside.

'You'd think Bernardo thought we didn't know what tram to take,' said Bruce, convulsed at what he was saying. 'Which tram do we take, John?'

'Depends which way we're going home,' his brother concluded sagely. He had not the faintest idea what he was going to say before he spoke, so what he said came as much a surprise to him as to Bruce, and everything he said struck them both as the most colossal joke. 'Let's wait for a tram to make up on us, shall we? Then we'll know which is the one we should take.'

But the right tram never came—either that, or they forgot to look out for it. Anyway, it was pleasant to walk home when they found the streets so empty. No one to jostle into you or bump you, as Bruce pointed out. Indeed so empty were the streets they found themselves bumping into things, since there were scarcely any people about. That must be a form of attraction, John said, whereupon Bruce asked what was so attractive about a bus standard?

Their footsteps echoed as they did on a Sunday morning when they went for the newspapers. They asked each other whose turn it was to go for them next Sunday, stopping to discuss it at some length. Both thought it was the other's, but each said amicably he would take it on.

It was all so pleasant they never wanted to reach home. Bruce told John they spent the best hours of the twenty-four in bed, and John told Bruce he would remind him of that in the morning. This was John's

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best joke, and they took some time to recover from it.

Mountview Street was quite different from the street they had left that evening. Indeed they hardly recognised it. John said that must be because it was night now, only they had seen it often enough at night time, but never had they seen it look like this.

A full moon swung in the heavens—it was good as a lamp, as Bruce said. Not all the houses were in darkness; some had their lights on and their curtains drawn back, so that the rooms behind the bay and oriel windows looked shallow, like a lit ship. The moon rocked in the sky behind elongated chimney-stalks, which formed the rigging. They pointed out to each other how exactly like a ship they were; they could even see them going up and down, swelling and billowing like sails.

No sooner had they entered their cloſe than Bruce took John outside again to whisper to him, 'It's so quiet on our stair, I feel we should take off our shoes!' This was almost as good as one of John's jokes. He gave him a good-natured shove and told him not to be an ass.

He was still thinking about their shoes, and smiling away to himself over Bruce's craziness as he followed his younger brother upstairs, when something happened.

It was as though a draught had blown into his mind, snuffing out the lantern of the moon and extinguishing the marvellous ships riding high on monstrous seas. He felt everything plunge, as if he himself were falling. Only he did not fall. It was much worse than that. Everything straightened out, flattened into rectangular lines around him as he

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found the ground stationary as stone beneath his feet.

The door of the Craig flat was wide open, and Ailsa was standing at it, watching him come upstairs. That, of course, was where the draught had come from—from the Craigs' open door, where Ailsa stood, waiting.

Chapter Three

JOHN could have seen Bruce far enough, flapping his whole arm like that, to wave to Ailsa when he passed her on his way upstairs. He might know that pretending to be drunk was the last type of joke she would appreciate.

The only thing he himself could do when he reached the Craig flat was to enter it. Ailsa irritated him by intimating he was not to make a noise: that, he felt, was totally unnecessary. He had not the slightest intention of wakening the household.

He followed her into their small morning- or sitting-room. He never knew why this room should slightly depress him, or perhaps he only discovered to-night that it had this effect upon him, for it was comfortable and well-appointed. But he told himself he did find it depressing. It was as though his thoughts were arguing with each other, unable, now they had fastened on to a subject, to leave it alone.

Was it because he realised this was the type of room he and Ailsa would have once they married, more modern perhaps but quite undistinguished, a room with no moonshine about it? He could prove that because the curtains were drawn, banishing everything happening outside, and closing the room in on itself. They could hear upstairs when Bessie below drew the curtains, the satisfactory swish as the hooks ran along the rails hidden behind professionally made pelmets. Everything worked as it should in the Craig flat.

Ailsa had turned to face him.

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'Well?' she asked, the one word of interrogation emphatic with challenge.

'Well,' he repeated flatly.

With an effort he turned his attention to what had displeased her, for that she was displeased was obvious. No one could make her displeasure so keenly felt as Ailsa. There was something between them he must straighten out; something, he was afraid, for which he and he alone was responsible. He proceeded to find out what it was.

'You're back, Ailsa,' he said hopefully. 'You're home.' He must try to remember not to attempt her name again: never before had he noticed it was difficult to say. 'I knew of course you were coming back to-night. Eight o'clock, Mrs. Craig said. I said to Bruce when we went into town, I must be back by eight—Ailsa's coming home.'

He had forgotten about her name and practice was certainly not making perfect in his case. Abashed, he stopped short at the end of his sentence.

'But you weren't home by eight, or nine, or ten, or eleven,' she enumerated. 'Why not?'

'I was at Roberto's. With Bruce. All the time. I swear I was at Roberto's with Bruce all the time.'

He over-stressed this as dimly he felt it should take a load from Ailsa's mind. Unfortunately it did nothing of the kind.

'Do you think I care where you were? Why weren't you back by eight?'

Ailsa was asking a question. Ailsa was waiting for his reply. Ailsa was due an answer.

'I must have forgotten all about it,' he said.

The sober truth was too unpalatable for her to

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accept: she rejected it straight away.

'You mean you got drunk instead.'

'I mean nothing of the kind,' he said indignantly. 'I'm not drunk.'

'Aren't you? As it's the only excuse you have, I wouldn't throw it away if I were you. If you're not drunk, what do you mean coming home at this hour? And in this condition?'

'There's nothing wrong with my condition,' he emphasised. 'And why shouldn't I come home when I like?' Better not harp on that string since he had broken his promise to be back by eight. But the knowledge that he was in the wrong did not make him feel in the least placatory towards her. She noticed that: so did he, and regretted he could do nothing about it. 'I'm not drunk. You don't know drunkenness when you see it. I had dinner, a very good dinner, and a drink or two, or it wouldn't have been a good dinner.' He felt he had scored an undoubted point there. 'I'm full of social glow, that's all.'

'If it's social glow that's giving you that silly smile, I wish you would take it off your face.'

'It's a bit difficult to take off what I don't know I've got on.'

'And you still say you're not drunk?'

'I say I'm not drunk.'

The smile had whipped from his face and he was looking what she had seldom, if ever, seen him look—angry. Backed with self-righteousness, her own temper rose to match his.

'If you're not drunk, John, then let's discuss things. There's quite a lot to discuss, isn't there?'

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'Right.' His attitude was the attitude of a boxer putting on, not taking off, his gloves. He sat down on a chair, to intimate this would take time, but he had the whole night at his disposal—and hers. His dark hair was ruffled a little at the back and his dark eyes sparkled like flints. She had never seen him like this, his face keyed and lively, incontestable yet so much himself, as though she were seeing for the first time behind his façade, into his very works. Never had she found him more attractive than at this moment, and never had she felt so little contact with him. 'Come on. Let's have it. Out with it.'

She found, to her surprise, she was long past the shocked stage, but resentment at his tone embittered her words.

'Out with what, John?'

'What you're thinking. What you've been thinking for long enough. It's all bottled up inside you, isn't it? And what happens to things in bottles? They lose their shape, they become distorted through the glass. They swim up like bladder seaweed when you give the bottle a shake, and then you lose them again. Well, don't let's lose them again. Let's take off the cork, fish them out and see what they're really like.'

She felt her face heaten darkly—how dare he talk to her as though she were a frustrated spinster, someone twice her age.

'Thank you,' she said icily. 'I'll look after my own subconscious, and you look after yours. That should keep you busy enough without dabbling in mine.'

'I thought you said you wanted to discuss things.'

'So I did, and so I think we should.'

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'What things?' She felt his gaze steel itself against her.

'About you and me, John. About our engagement.'

'What about our engagement? Don't you want it to continue? Is that what you're getting at?'

'Yes,' she said clearly, 'that's what I'm getting at.'

It took only one word from her to relax the tension between them. It was as though she actually heard the hiss of released steam.

She had stood as much as she could from him, but even at that moment she knew it was nothing that had happened to-night which made her reply as she had. It went back to the day of his father's funeral when she had heard him sigh.

'What do you think about our engagement, John?' she cried out at him. 'Do you want it to continue? Is that what you're getting at?'

His eyes were no longer boring at her, he was looking down as he sat, as if he were big and heavy, in his chair.

'I think you're : 'ght,' he said at last. 'I think our engagement has been a mistake. But it's better to find out before it's too late isn't it?'

She felt she could have struck him for that.

'We've been engaged for some years,' she said. 'You've taken a long time to find out that it's been a mistake.'

He was looking at her now, mildly for the first time that night.

'I've taken no longer than you have,' he pointed out.

All the unsatisfactoriness of their meetings, all

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their laboured leave-takings, all the frustration of their contacts, had led up to this moment, for which he was responsible. It was he who had been perfunctory, not she. Throughout, she had suffered for the lack of concord, due to him, between them. Virtually he had broken their engagement long ago, and left her with the onus to say it was in pieces. It was his acquiescence about everything she found so destroying. She felt choked, as though she had too much to swallow.

She tore at the ring on her finger, to take it off, to give it back to him before another moment had passed, that he would think she was glad to be finished with him. She still had some pride left: it was the only thing she had.

He saw what she was doing, and frowned spasmodically.

'Don't, Ailsa,' he said, 'don't. What do you think I'd do with it?'

'What do you think I would?' Her words were barely audible, fierce with feeling. 'You *will* take it.' She put it into his pocket to make sure he would. 'What do you think I'd do with it?' She wanted to scream with laughter in his face, but had herself too well under control for any such hideousness.

He had risen now, and made towards the door. She watched every step he took, as though her mind were a slow-motion camera photographing his slightest movement, prolonging it intolerably, as she waited for what he was going to say. For even he would have to say something before he left. It was on his good-bye she would have to live, eke out her existence.

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He turned before he reached the door and faced into the room. She watched him look round it. He was thinking of the time he and she had once before been together in this room. It was shortly after they became engaged, he remembered, during holiday-time when Ailsa was living alone in the flat.

That had been an ideal opportunity for what he termed in his thoughts, when he and Bruce had discussed the subject, 'that kind of thing.' He had been the one to extricate them both from the ideal opportunity, because, so he had imagined, he had been protecting her. But now he wondered if she had been the only one he had considered as he found himself thinking, 'If I had given in then, I would have been trapped now. We should have had to marry. Thank God I didn't. She must be as glad as I am that I didn't.'

His gaze reached her face and dwelt upon it. Her lips were compressed and her colour heightened as she watched him across the room taut with the silence between them. Yes, she must be as glad as he was.

'I'm sorry about everything, Ailsa,' he said before he turned and left.

That was what he had spared her to live on, five words—'I'm sorry about everything, Ailsa.' She heard the click of their outer door as he closed it quietly behind him.

He would be downstairs first thing to-morrow morning, when he came to his senses, saying he had found her ring in his pocket and pretending, in his crazy Garnett way, he didn't know how it had come there.

The echo of his own front door reverberated down

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the stairs to her, as though it had been shut in her face. She knew she was merely blinding herself, trying to make the unbearable bearable by postponing it.

John turned on every light in their room. Bruce was not only in bed but fast asleep, breathing, instead of quietly and evenly as was his wont, noisily, stertorously. His brother had great difficulty wakening him, but at last, at the end of a long snore like an engine taking a difficult gradient, he woke up.

'I just wanted to tell you,' said John, 'I'm as good as you are now.'

Bruce sat bolt upright in bed as the impact of the other's words reached him. The glory of the evening still clung to them, and he knew exactly what his brother meant.

'No!' he gasped. 'You mean you and Ailsa are no longer engaged? Then you *are* as good as I am. John, I can't tell you how glad I am. Congratulations, old son,' and he sank back as suddenly as he had risen.

In a matter of moments the engine was tackling the difficult gradient again.

Chapter Four

NEITHER spoke much next morning, there seemed little to say; besides, everything worth saying had been said the night before. Bruce made hard toast for them, and remarked he had a thirst on him like an Irishman. He was amenable, and asked John what was the best thing to quench it.

They had breakfast in the kitchen, which was going to upset Mrs. Boag, but they saw no point trekking with everything into the dining-room. She had done a big curtain wash the previous day and they sat under the pulley which was like a cloud with screens. They felt spent but invigorated, as though they had been brought safely back by the same wave which had washed them overboard.

The kitchen window was a little loose and chapped in its frame in a companionable way: the alarm-clock on the mantelpiece had a loud, china tick, reminding John of a cottage timepiece. He watched the tiers of shelves with their coloured tins and dishes come through the smoke of his cigarette as it wafted towards the gaunt ceiling.

'The next time you become engaged, see the girl's at a distance,' ruminated Bruce. 'Downstairs is much too near.'

John did not even trouble to reply to the profundity of this remark.

Thus Mrs. Boag found them when she let herself into the flat shortly before nine.

'Mr. John and Mr. Bruce!' she exclaimed, unable to believe her eyes as she entered the kitchen. She

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caught sight of the bottle of salts on the table. 'You're not ill, are you, the pair of you?' she accused.

'Never felt better in our lives,' Bruce assured her.

'What would your mother say—having your meal in the kitchen?' she wanted to know as she clucked round the table, putting the stopper back into its bottle, placing a piece of toast they hadn't eaten in the rack, mopping crumbs into her cupped hand, to try to bring some orderliness to the confusion she saw everywhere.

As Mrs. Boag had a more strongly developed sense of propriety than their mother, neither made any attempt to guess what she would say.

'They're coming back to-morrow,' said John.

'We've had a postcard from them,' said Bruce, 'one of the castle. Have a look-see, Mrs. Boag.'

'Well, you'll be glad to see them and no mistake,' she said, picking off the coal-bunker of all places a dish-cloth that had been through something since she had last seen it.

'I don't see how you make that out,' replied Bruce, finishing his cup of tea standing. 'What's wrong with us as we are?' He waved his cup at her to include her and she felt decorated. 'We've all managed famously. And we're having breakfast in here to-morrow as our last fling. Why didn't we think of it before? It's the nicest room in the house, because nothing matters in here.'

'Don't you let Miss Lennie hear you say that,' Mrs. Boag warned him darkly.

The kitchen was Lennie's domain as she did the cooking for the household, to leave her mother free to devote all her time to nursing. To-morrow, when

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they returned home, John realised there would no longer be any nursing for their mother to do.

The stone stairs of the building smelt of the sea, as they always did first thing in the morning. He walked down Mountview Street into Great Western Road, for a tram. He used his motor car only for travelling, when he was 'on the roads'; it never seemed worth his while to take it out of the garage for short journeys, such as to the centre of town. He stood at the tram stop and looked up at Cooper's clock-tower. The high blue sky with white clouds streamed past it, but he had the sensation it was the tower that was moving and the sky stationary.

He was no longer engaged to Ailsa, he was free—as free as she was. She would be feeling what he was feeling, a little bemused as they accustomed themselves to the newness of their situation.

He took a No. 1 tram and went upstairs. How, feeling as they both did now, enlarged with relief, had they ever embarked on an engagement? He supposed that was one of those things which do happen, a predicament they had found themselves in before they realised where they were. But finding their way out was decidedly not one of those things that do happen. They had both everything to be grateful for there.

From the top of the tram he looked into the tenements where people lived above shops. It was as though his new-found freedom eased his mind and it could enjoy making exploratory excursions. Behind these curtains of every shade and fabric were homes; he could see the backs of mirrors and dressing-tables as he jolted past in the car. People lived in these secretive interiors their unsecret lives, to the music

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of the jangle and bells of tram-cars and the thunder and roar of buses. They came in and went to bed, rose in the morning to begin another day, moved about their business, each acting on the other members of their household like differently keyed strings on the same instrument, strings upon which life played.

He saw the elaborate names no longer used, disappearing in fading gold, at the corners of the tenements. Terraces, avenues, crescents and quadrants had become streets and roads. Only on the factor's missive was it remembered that Mountview Street had once been known as Glamis Gardens.

His place of business was Fraser & Milward, wholesale stationers and printers, in a paved, arched cul-de-sac off Buchanan Street. The premises were in a basement but there was nothing of the vault about them, being large, roomy and well lit, the showroom bright and attractively modern. At regular intervals a distant rumbling could be heard as the subway trains tunnelled from St. Enoch's to Buchanan Street and from Buchanan Street to St. Enoch's.

Fraser & Milward were not only stationers, they made their own paper, in the mills at Dornadill, just out of Glasgow. John had entered the business when he left the army, and he liked everything about his work. His day had never been cut and dried into strict hours as was Bruce's, in a large shipping-office. From the beginning John had felt he belonged here, was part of it.

He went to Mr. Fraser's room. There were no Milwards left in the business now and Mr. Fraser was the head, but John never thought of him as the

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boss. He was more like the father in a family concern, although he was now the surviving representative of the original firm, for he had no sons.

'Well, John,' he greeted him as he clipped some letters together. His skin had the smooth fine-grained texture of his own best paper, which would never smudge ink or hair a nib, and his features were clear-cut as if stencilled. 'I wanted to see you early this morning so that we could have a quiet talk.'

Trailing behind it a noise like distant theatrical thunder, a train slotted through the catacomb of the subway.

'About the trouble at the mills?' said John. 'I've seen Rose, and he says it's coming to nothing this time. The workers aren't going to cut off their noses to spite the union's face, and what happened at the Strath Mills must have taught the unions a lesson someone's still paying sweetly for.'

'No, not about the mills. About you.'

'About me?' John's voice echoed with surprise.

'Yes, about you. I've been wanting to say this for some time, but I knew you had enough on your mind with your father's illness. When I retire, you'll take my place. Well, I shall be retiring this year.'

'Whatever would you retire for?' John heard himself ask in a winded way. He looked at him searchingly, trying to assess his age: Mr. Fraser could surely not be all that old. He had about him the agelessness of a coin that time has but brightened as it has thinned.

The older man smiled, as though pleased with both of them.

'Because I've a country home where I want to live

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all the year round. Because I know that you can fill my place here better than I can.'

'No,' said John, still looking at him hard, 'that's not true. I couldn't. There's only one man who can fill your place and that's yourself. You've made it what it is. Nothing would be the same if you went.'

'Nothing is the same except me and the place I fill.' A sigh escaped him. 'I don't mind your knowing that this repeated trouble we're having at the mills has done something to me. This I-want-more-and-more-for-less-and-less attitude. I've had to leave it to you to handle all along.'

'I don't see what's wrong with that, Mr. Fraser. You shouldn't have anything to do with it. It's not up your street.'

'No one knows better than you how much isn't up my street these days. I don't want to remain just as a figurehead, an anachronism. Virtue goes out of this business for me every time one of our old hands die—and now there are so few left, only Sandy at the tooling and Neilston in the machine-shop. You're different, you're young. You don't remember what things were. It was craftsmanship, pride in their work, in the old days. Now they don't even bother to learn their job or ply their trade. It was the worker then, it's the workers now. Nothing makes a man forget about right so quickly as talking about his rights. They're getting past in a body what no single man would ever have dreamed of, and in the last resort that's what it comes down to every time: the single man, the individual.'

'They're certainly a bright lot,' agreed John. 'Their heads aren't worth the price of hats.'

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‘The older I grow the more I see that it’s what one believes in that makes life worth living. What do they believe in? Football pools. But they don’t affect you as they do me. You know what their rights are, and you’ll see they get them, but no more.’

John was no longer listening, as he thought how odd were the tricks life played. A matter of hours separated Ailsa from this news and what it would have meant to her. When she married him, she would have given up a good salary, then two of them would have had to live on his. Now when he could have given her a home important enough to gratify her, they were no longer engaged.

‘Who do you think should take your place?’ he heard Mr. Fraser ask. ‘You have the most important ground to cover—the whole of Scotland, and we must have the right man for it.’

‘Ritchie,’ John said without a moment’s hesitation. ‘Derwent’s too English, and it would be a mistake to take Braithewaite from London when he returns the sheets he does. No one could learn his contacts as he knows them.’

‘Yes, I thought Ritchie too. He lives in Glasgow, which is an advantage.’

John had known that one day he would take over from Mr. Fraser, but never had he dreamed that day would make its appearance so soon. He had thought of it comfortably waiting for him in the future, like middle-age and growing old. He was not at all sure that he welcomed its arrival into the present. For one thing, it would mean he would have to give up travelling, and he had always enjoyed ‘the roads’. No more journeys from industrial city to county town, Perth,

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Dundee, Aberdeen, spending one night at inn or hotel, while Scotland and the north of England unrolled before him, his horizon bounded by cathedral spire and factory chimney in the south, in the north by mountains as ultimate as the Pole.

'I'll be going off the week after next,' he said slowly. 'To do all the places Ritchie couldn't do for me. I'm later than usual this time because of everything.' He referred to his father's death.

'I won't be retiring until the end of the year,' said Mr. Fraser, and his words were like a reprieve to his listener. That would give him time to do his complete round in autumn, to leave everything fair and square for Ritchie.

He was alone in the evening when their mother and Lennie returned, for Bruce had left that day for his week-end at Rannick. Their mother entered the sitting-room by herself, advancing well into it before she greeted her son, as though she wanted to feel her home round her again, fit herself back into it. She had left the front door wide open for Lennie, who was paying the taxi-driver, and the house became full of wind. Lennie came running in a minute or two later, with coats over her arm, her face lit and alive—as Lennie used to look, as though she always arrived on the high tide of happenings.

'John,' she exclaimed, 'what does this mean? I met Ailsa on the stairs and she cut me dead.' Lennie indulged in the exaggeration of the born story-teller. 'At least she never looked at the ground I trod on, to quote Mrs. Boag, which is the same as a cut when we could have touched each other.'

This information had the effect of startling the two

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Garnetts who heard it into momentary silence.

'I don't see why she should do that,' John said thoughtfully at last. 'It has nothing to do with you. But we broke off our engagement the night before last.'

'I see why she should—she thinks it has everything to do with me. She is holding me, us, responsible for it.' Lennie was so intuitive that neither she nor her family ever troubled to separate what she felt from what she knew.

'She can't,' John said impatiently; 'you were away at the time.'

'She'll always blame it on us,' insisted Lennie.

His mother had turned to look at him over her shoulder as she asked, 'Why did you break your engagement, John?'

'It was Ailsa who did it. We found it was mutual—that's all.'

'It seems a pity,' remarked the mother, 'when you could have married shortly. Are you sure the break couldn't have been avoided? That it isn't simply the effect of an engagement that has lasted too long?'

'Positive sure,' he told her. 'We both are. We should have done it long ago.'

'I'm glad the engagement's broken off, John,' Lennie confided in him when their mother left them alone. 'I don't think it's a pity. Ailsa was never one of us.' She went over to the front windows and looked outside, the coats still over her arm. This travelling with gear was one of the few characteristics she shared with her elder sister, but whereas Iris was always the haphazard centre of a whirl, Lennie was orderly, careful of her things. 'And she would never

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have become one of us—ever. It's lovely to be home again,' and she sighed with sheer happiness.

He came and stood behind her. They all had it, even Bruce despite his nonchalance, this inner excitement. They could ignite not only themselves but each other with it. Perhaps that was why Ailsa had never been one of them: sparks from them could never set her torch a-flare. Lennie would say she had no torch to flame.

He gazed outside. There was what he had always thought of since a child as a Biblical sky, with thunderclouds like prophets storming across it, their robes swelling round them, holding in their out-clenched fists scroll and mountain-top.

'You know what I'm going to do?' demanded Lennie. 'Learn to cook properly.'

'After having sampled Mrs. Boag's efforts, Bruce will tell you you're about the properest cook he has struck,' said John.

She turned to laugh at him.

'Mother will be taking over that now,' she said. 'What I mean by properly is not just plain cooking for a small household, but able to turn out anything for a quantity. Then I can ask what I like when I look for a post. But it mustn't be a living-in post—I don't want that. I want to come home every night,' and she looked out once again.

The convex panes of the windows opposite gave an aquarium effect, filled with light instead of water and tenanted not by fish but a vase of ordinary flowers. But their aquarium setting robbed them of any ordinariness. He had the curious impression of looking at the flowers not through a window but under a

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glass mould or dome. Thus they reminded him of a bride's small bouquet he had once seen in a glass case in an old-fashioned hotel in Holland. He remembered thinking then that it was the glass case that had preserved the tight little bouquet for all those years. If it were removed, the dried flowers would surely shrivel into nothingness, leaving between your finger and thumb only spikes, like thorns that could no longer jag, and the scent of a forgotten summer that now smelt of hay.

On Monday, at the office, he was told he was wanted on the telephone. He picked up the receiver to hear Ailsa's voice saying, 'Is that you, John?' Her tone was peremptory, but so relieved was he that he need no longer wonder what on earth he had overlooked that he answered with a warmth he had not felt for a long time.

'It's just this—' she began, and stopped. 'Well, what about the announcement for the papers?'

'What announcement?' he asked stupidly. So there was something he had overlooked after all.

Her words reached him, brittle and to the point.

'About our engagement being broken off,' she said.

'Do you think that's necessary?' he demurred. After all, it was not as though a date had been put on their wedding. But if she had not thought it necessary, she would not have telephoned him. Yes, he supposed she would want it done; her circle was much wider than his, and an intimation in the newspaper was the least embarrassing method for her broken engagement to be made known. 'You'd like it to go in?' he asked.

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Like it! She longed to cry out at him, 'No, John, I wouldn't like it—I'd love it to go in.' Instead she said coldly:

'It will have to be inserted, won't it?'

'Yes, of course,' he agreed over-willingly. 'Leave it to me, Ailsa.' Bitterly she thought that anything she had ever left to him had simply not substantiated. 'I'll see to that. The *Glasgow Herald*, I suppose.'

'The *Glasgow Herald* won't take it from you. We will both have to be present before it's accepted.'

'Heavens!' he ejaculated. So she had tried to deal with the intimation on her own. 'You'll want it in as soon as possible, won't you?'

'I think it should be inserted as soon as possible.' Her every sentence was implicit with censure.

'Yes, of course, if it's going in at all—I mean, the sooner the better,' he agreed hurriedly. 'I'll meet you any time you like then, Ailsa. What about this morning? Yes, straight away. Outside Fuller's?—that's convenient for the *Herald*. Right.'

He saw her coming down Buchanan Street as he waited outside Fuller's, and he found himself thinking, 'Ailsa will marry of course—she's attractive—she could marry anyone.' There was always a crispness about her, and her appearance had none of the cutting edge that her crispness of manner had. Like all women with clothes sense, she tended to under-rather than over-dress, so that it was her own sex who marked her particularly in restaurant and street. It had always been the men who had looked at Iris.

She did not speak when he smiled and greeted her. Side by side they walked the few yards to the newspaper office. Instead of being torn with the pity of it

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all, he was wondering if he should say something to her about cutting Lennie. Wisely his instinct warned him against that.

She had the intimation already drawn up, 'The marriage arranged between . . . will not now take place', and he felt inadequate, as he had often felt in the past, in the face of such competence. Ailsa always thought of everything: it used to irk him being posed with all the things of which Ailsa could think.

They stood outside the office after the intimation had been accepted. He was aware of her intensity as though she were charged with it, strong as hatred. She must hate him now, because he had allowed their engagement to drag on when a break should have been made long ago. He knew that in this state anything he said would be wrong.

'What about going to Fuller's for coffee?' he asked doggedly.

She turned to look at him and her whole face seemed to spit like a cat's. He could make a casual suggestion like that on a day such as this, after a meeting such as theirs had had to be. Did he not remember the times they had been at Fuller's together when they were in love, when they first became engaged?

She looked into his eyes: he might remember the times they had met there, but he did not remember when they were in love.

In that moment of painful penetration, she knew it was not his family who had come between them. He had never been in love with her.

Defeated, she turned away and left him without a word.

Chapter Five

BRUCE returned while they were at dinner, explosive with good spirits.

'I didn't need the dressing-gown you paid for, after all,' he announced to John. 'I had a suite to myself! What a house—with the views from all the windows coming into the very rooms.'

'Did you like Mr. Grant?' his brother asked carefully.

'Yes, he's a nice fellow, easy to talk to,' he replied, to the other's relief. That meant Bruce had not gone stately and remote, as he might have done unless he was met more than half-way.

'And Mrs. Grant—you'd like Mrs. Grant,' their mother said, more than enquired, as she fingered the handle of the vegetable dish.

'A funny person who didn't like her,' vouchsafed her son. 'She's a darling. You wouldn't need to tell her things, she'd know. She's a lovely woman too.'

'She's still lovely, is she?' his mother said, in her far-off voice.

'Still lovely,' Bruce assured her with the authority of first-hand knowledge.

'What a pity they've no children,' remarked Lennie, 'when they have everything to hand down and no one to hand it down to.'

'There—there was a relation there—a girl. Flora Mure.' Bruce said her name as if he liked it. Hurriedly he gulped down some water. 'The Mure's spelt M-U-R-E. She's a niece of Mrs. Grant.'

'Yes,' put in their mother, as if remembering, 'she

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was a Mure before she married.'

'And what's Flora Mure like?' Lennie asked brightly after a pause.

'Like Mrs. Grant, only years and years and years younger of course,' Bruce told her guardedly. It was unlike him to put up defences with his family.

'That means she must be years and years and years lovelier than Mrs. Grant,' commented Lennie. 'Is she older or younger than you?'

'Younger,' replied Bruce, staring at the table-centre without seeing it, as though fond of his thoughts. He seemed to waken himself up from a dream, and looked at his sister across the table. 'She's just your age,' he announced with the pomp of proclamation. Then he added lamely, 'That will be nice.'

'What will be nice?' Lennie not unreasonably demanded.

'Her being your age.' He was beginning to mumble as Lennie fixed him with her steady gaze, unhelpfully waiting for him to come to the point. 'I mean it will be nice for you having her and her having you, both being the same age, when she comes here.'

'What do you mean by when she comes here?' persisted Lennie.

Bruce emerged from behind his defences into the open.

'To stay,' he said brazenly.

'To stay?' Lennie repeated warmly. 'She's not coming here to stay. I've lived for twenty-one years without realising the niceness of Flora Mure being my age, and I'll live for twenty-one years longer without noticing my loss.'

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'She'll have to come,' said Bruce, 'I've invited her rather, the Grants practically asked me to ask her. I couldn't get out of it,' he pleaded all the more ingratiatingly because he knew they knew he had no wish to get out of it. 'I really couldn't. It won't be for long,' he hastened to put in, 'only while she sees her mother into a nursing-home in Glasgow for treatment. Flora will travel with her, then she'll go home to her father. Fancy, they—the Mures, I mean—live on an island all the year round off the west of Scotland. Ericht. Her father owns it.'

'Just fancy,' conceded Lennie. 'She had better stay on her island which her father owns off the west coast of Scotland, for she's not coming here.'

There was no need for John or his mother to say anything: this was between Lennie and Bruce. No Garnett ever called for reinforcements, each was a side in him or herself.

'Don't be silly, Lennie,' said Bruce, 'she'll have to come—just for a day or two, or so. We're the only people she knows in Glasgow.'

'You mean you are. You can book a room for her in a hotel then.'

'She couldn't possibly go to a hotel,' said Bruce. 'You don't understand. Do you know this, Flora hadn't been to a picture-house until she was fifteen,' his voice was full of pride, 'when she left Ericht for practically the first time.'

'The sooner she sees the inside of a hotel now she's twenty-one the better for her,' Lennie told him unfeelingly. 'It would be all right for you if she came here. You're out all day, but I'd have her in my pocket morning, noon and night. You know what

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you'd have felt if I'd invited Flora Mure's brother who was just your age to play with you.'

This argument was unanswerable as far as her younger brother was concerned; they all knew exactly what he would have felt, Bruce who was prepared to shine for no one.

'You'll like her,' he said, as though trying to make amends, 'I know you'll like her, Lennie. I wouldn't have asked her if I hadn't been sure of that.'

'I thought you couldn't get out of it,' she took him up—he was no match for her, and they both knew it, 'that the Grants practically asked you to ask her.'

'So they did,' he was beginning to mumble again, 'so they did, but what I mean is, you will like her.'

He was in bed when John turned on the light later that night. It revealed that he was not asleep, but was lying with his hands behind his head, staring up at the ceiling. He did not speak until the room was once more in darkness.

'John,' he said, 'I just want you to know—I was wrong. There is such a thing as falling in love. You know at once. It happens just like that. And you know if it's not her, it'll be nobody. A lifetime isn't long enough to get to the end of what you feel for her.'

John grunted in reply. Odd to think he had lived in the world a decade longer than Bruce and never experienced what his younger brother had. Perhaps he never would. Yet it was something to know that Bruce was in love, Bruce who was cynical and scornful as only the untried can be. That somehow proved something for John. He fell asleep before he solved what it was.

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As for Bruce, he lay looking up through the dark at where he knew the cracks mapped the ceiling. That was Flora's island up there. Ericht. For all these years it had been flowering down on him, he knew every river by heart. Just as now he knew her by heart, the fairness of her skin, the set of her head, the sheen upon her hair—as though she had caught the golden glow from another clime and carried it about with her.

'When would you like dinner to-night, John?' Lennie asked at breakfast next morning. 'When would it suit you and your friend to have it?'

'At the usual time,' he told her. 'I'll bring him back with me, and we can have a drink beforehand.'

'I'll be going out after dinner,' announced Bruce.

'I never expected you to stay in,' retorted John.

He had felt he owed Tom Ritchie some hospitality, after he had done so much of his work for him during these past months. But now, as he saw Bruce and Lennie looking at him with their bright eyes, he rather regretted having invited his friend home. What would they make of strenuous Tom Ritchie with his Glasgow accent, who held his knife as though it were a pencil and called his napkin a serviette?

'Keep off politics, will you?' he said by way of warning as he pushed his chair from the table. 'Tom votes Labour.'

They arrived straight from the office, and Tom had a wash-up before entering the sitting-room. He was a man in his thirties, with the broad shoulders of

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a rugby player, which minimised his height. His clean-shaven face was ruddy and his ruminative brown eyes were often belied by the sportiveness of his expression. John saw him entering the room now very much as though he were about to tackle. He had brought flowers for their mother, which he thrust at her in their paper wrapping as though they were anything but flowers.

'John would tell you why I couldn't be there,' he said, obviously referring to the funeral.

'How good of you, Mr. Ritchie,' she thanked him. She was not a charming woman but her breeding made her accept his gift and undo the white paper as though she were. 'They're beautiful, simply beautiful. Yes, John told us why you couldn't be there. You were so good, taking over for him.'

'None of us knew at the time, but I've just been getting my hand in since his job's to be mine now,' said Tom. He quaffed off the glass of sherry with the despatch of a drinker who has never had to titillate himself with apéritifs. 'Good news about John, isn't it?'

Lennie and Bruce were waiting for them in the small dining-room. John effected the introductions and everyone sat down.

'We hear you vote Labour, Mr. Ritchie,' began Lennie.

'Yes,' Bruce backed her up. 'John said we weren't to mention it to you, but why shouldn't we?'

'You're not ashamed of being a Socialist, are you?' asked Lennie. 'Are you a Scottish Nationalist as well, Mr. Ritchie?'

'Or do you wait for an election to say you are?'

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enquired Bruce. 'Remember '45, when Scotland was on every Socialist map, with Home Rule written across it?'

'And all Scotland got out of the Socialists in power was more Londonisation,' complained Lennie.

'Victimisation, if you ask me,' pronounced Bruce.

During the come and go of this dialogue, Tom Ritchie's head swung from one to the other.

'Are you?' he demanded of Bruce, when he recovered himself somewhat.

'Am I what?' asked Bruce.

'A Scottish Nationalist.'

'Not I,' replied the other. 'The only people who would get into a Scottish parliament would be the cranks, the only people who want it, and I've no wish to be governed by men who look as though they're losing their kilts, with their chins coming through their beards.'

'The terrible thing about your Welfare State, Mr. Ritchie,' Lennie informed him, 'is that you not only can't save in it, you can't even economise.'

'Who's happier?' Bruce wanted to know. 'The miner with his television-set going on strike because the water at the pit-head baths isn't the right temperature, or the new poor choking the hospital queues for their turn-on the operating-table, or the doctor filling in forms like a civil servant instead of doctoring.'

'You bribed the dentists into the National Health Service,' claimed Lennie, 'and blackmailed the doctors.'

'Pay not the slightest attention to them, Tom,' advised John. 'From the way they're talking, you'd

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think they were two of the Young Conservatives' star turns, but you can take it from me they haven't even addressed an envelope to further the good cause. It's all patter with them, and nothing more.'

Tom Ritchie's square shoulders looked squarer than ever as he prepared himself not only to take them both on but to enjoy doing it.

'Which part of England is your beat, Mr. Ritchie?' Mrs. Garnett asked him.

'The north-east,' he replied, 'that includes Yorkshire.' His hostess obviously did not want the meal to deteriorate into a political fray. He noticed she rarely spoke, was more of a background than anything else as she sat consumed by her own thoughts.

'Yorkshire's a bit like Scotland, isn't it, with moors and things?' asked Bruce, now prepared to be handsome.

'Personally,' said Tom, fixing him with his brown eye, 'I don't think you have to be a Scottish Nationalist to know that no place can ever be like Scotland. Take the Yorkshire moors for instance, they're not a bit like Dava or Rannoch or Dalwhinnie. Dig up a Scots moor and you'll come upon peat, dig into a Yorkshire one and you'll meet coal. But Yorkshire's the best part of England as far as Tom Ritchie's concerned. They're so much themselves there, with their own names for things. Guess what they call a fetch or wraith—a waft!'

John saw his brother and sister considering their visitor.

'A waft,' said Lennie, 'hasn't any legs.'

'A waft doesn't need legs,' Bruce told her.

'That's right,' remarked Tom Ritchie. 'A fetch

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knows its business, just as a wraith once knew its body.'

'But a waft,' said Lennie, 'is just breath.'

'Just breath,' Tom agreed gustily.

He insisted on carrying a pile of dishes into the kitchen after the meal, although John heard Lennie tell him laughingly, 'Followers aren't allowed in this house!' When he entered the sitting-room he at once made for the oriel window, just as though he were a Garnett. The sky was full of the splendour of sunset, which marched up the hill of the adjacent street, trailing banners, burnishing the stone of buildings and making molten their windows.

'Whew,' whistled Tom, 'you're high up here. Out of the world and no mistake.'

'That's because we're on top of a hill,' said Bruce.

'The trees are like weeds, looking down on them from here,' said Tom, trying to accustom himself to the height.

'They're pretty at this time of year,' remarked the mother from the fireplace. 'I notice the hawthorn's coming out.'

'I don't like white hawthorn,' announced Lennie, entering with the coffee-tray.

'Neither do I,' said Bruce.

'Pink's all right but not white,' said Lennie, dispensing coffee with the unthinking alacrity of long practice. 'White's just like a cauliflower covered with white sauce.' She joined them at the window, coffee cup in hand. Outside, darting swifts made the air shrill with their sharp excited pipes.

'You shouldn't have told me that,' grumbled Tom. 'Now I'll never be able to look at white hawthorn

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without remembering what it's like.'

'She's put you off it, as we used to say when Iris refused what we didn't like,' said Bruce. He was always good-humoured immediately after dinner.

'Who's Iris?' Tom asked instantly.

'She's our married sister,' replied John.

'Iris is Iris,' amplified Bruce.

'The light no bushel could hide,' Lennie contributed sardonically. 'That's kinder than the skeleton in our cupboard.'

'More accurate too,' said Bruce. 'Skeletons belong to the past, but there's always something very present about Iris even when she's not here. You can turn the key in the lock on a cupboard and forget what's inside, but you just can't forget Iris. She sees to that.'

'I wish she would see to it,' said Mrs. Garnett. 'It's over two years now since we've heard from her.' She shivered spasmodically.

Lennie stopped herself in the nick of time from saying, 'That's a ghost walking over your grave.' Instead she crossed to the fireplace and knelt before the new stove. 'Are you warm enough at John's fire?' she asked, poking it. She had a pretty back and the leaping flames illuminated her head, with the small black bow tying her hair at the nape of her neck. She always called the new stove John's fire, although she had exchanged the tea-pot brown model he had ordered for a cream one.

'Iris will turn up, don't you worry,' Bruce said to his mother from his stance at the window. 'Bad pennies always do,' and he chinked the change in his pocket as though in confirmation of his words.

John wondered when Bruce was going out, but

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Bruce appeared to have forgotten his engagement until he heard his brother say that he and Tom were going to 'The Shinty' before it closed. Then he accompanied them as far as the street, where he said good-bye.

John and Tom walked down the hill without speaking. There were large tracts of silence in Tom's mind which John found very restful; going about with him was rather like going about with yourself in another body. They sat at the bar on high stools with the sunk look of two Glasgow men which successfully hid that this was a form of enjoyment. 'The Shinty' was the favoured haunt of certain of the staff of Broadcasting House near-by, and there was an air of coterie and charmed circle about its clientele. But neither John nor Tom was aware that one was sitting with his back to a producer, and the other facing a man, with bushy moustaches like a brigand, who could have given him a useful introduction if he had had a script in his pocket.

'How old's Lennie?' Tom asked rumblingly.

John brought himself back from some vague hinterland, so deep-set that he could not remember what he had been thinking. To return to this satisfactory oblivion, he would have to traverse known country, circumvent misleading by-paths, and slip over the border past the sentries of his thoughts. It was a complicated journey that involved all the hazards of the uncharted, for he was never quite sure whether he could return to that far country where thinking merged with thought. It seemed a pity to be recalled only to be asked how old was one's sister.

'What?' he asked. 'How old's Lennie? Twenty-

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one, of course.' Realising the unreasonableness of that 'of course', he added by way of amplification, 'Next month.'

'What date?' asked Tom.

'The thirteenth,' said John. 'That's Lennie's lucky number, thirteen.'

'Pretty tough luck on her, isn't it?' Tom said assertively.

'What is?'

'Well, you won't be able to hold any celebration, will you? What with a funeral in the family so recently.'

John felt in his pocket for his cigarette-case, opened it and took out a cigarette. The unknown pass by which he might have returned to that far country had now evaporated like mist. He prepared himself to be at home to Tom, but he made no reply to his last remark. Tom did not realise that, even if there had not been a recent funeral in the family, there would have been no celebration of the type he was envisaging: coming-of-age dance at The Lido Ballroom and Lennie presented, at the appropriate moment, with an outsize in cardboard silver keys. He eyed his glass speculatively.

'Pubs are funny, aren't they?' asked Tom, suddenly discursive. 'Each one has its own distinct clientele. Now at "The Quick 'Un" they all look like Socialist M.P.'s or T.U.C. officials, and at "The Round Up" as though they had some association with the sea. What would you say they look like here?'

John studied his fellow drinkers before coming to a decision.

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'Musical instruments,' he said at last.

'Yes, by jove you're right,' exclaimed Tom, 'that fellow with the hair over there for instance, and that one with the head.'

'Wind and repercussion,' said John.

Tom, beating the clock to it, ordered another round from the bar-tender in his tartan jacket, and both once more relapsed into silence.

When John left home a day or two later, he saw old Mrs. Irving, who lived in the main door flat, hovering above her short screens, and waved to her as he passed.

He and Iris used to visit Mrs. Irving every Christmas morning, to be given lemonade in wine glasses and small sweet cakes, and a present each which they felt through its coloured crinkly paper to discover what it was as they ran upstairs. Her husband had had business associations with the East and Mrs. Irving still lived in her airless rooms amongst ivory bric-à-brac and long-necked vases of startling dimensions—mementoes, souvenirs and trophies that time had turned into memorials.

As John glimpsed her this morning, shrunk and diminished with age, her small globe of a face reminded him of a spent moon, now influenced by instead of influencing remote tidal movements.

You saw them up and down the street, pulling back their heavy curtains rather late in the morning, these elderly women, spinsters and widows who had grown old behind their coarse white screens which patterned what they gazed at. The longest established

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resident in their building, everything and everyone had changed around them. They were the relics of a generation that had sprung up in another century, whose roots had been allowed to settle in a less disturbed age.

As he walked down the hill, he found himself thinking that when he and Bruce, Lennie and Iris, were as old as they were, provided a third war had not intervened, they would not be the survivors of their generation. They would be its representatives, contemporaries all to whose expectancy of life doctors and scientists had added more than a decade.

What would they do with this extended lease, what could they do with it, those who had been born between two wars, whose roots instead of reaching down into the soil of other ages, drawing sustenance from the rich deposits of older generations, groped for any shallow hold through shifting sands?

The air was sweet with the scent of hawthorn, lilac and apple blossom, and the trees, leafy but not yet thickened into the fullness of summer, gave the side streets they lined an impression of country lanes.

If a city were blitzed until not one brick or stone stood upon another, it would be from the country earth, left to itself and pushing growth between the rubble, that the miracle of life would take hold, seed and bear fruit.

He always liked going into town this way because, owing to the tilt of the hill, he seemed to be walking down on top of chimney-pots and roofs. Distance blurred the huddle of grey buildings into a grape blue, while the ramparts of spire and chimney-stalk

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built a multitude of roofs into the homogeneity of some fabulous castle.

It happened in Buchanan Street, as he paused to light a cigarette. The most momentous, stupendous experience of his life occurred in the time it took him to strike a match and bend his head.

John felt himself steady as a rock even as he reeled with the impact of it. This was not a sensation, it was something that had taken possession of his senses, something that held, preserved and enclosed him.

In that moment he knew no harm could come to him, he was safe as country earth, safe for ever. But what overwhelmed him was the realisation that 'for ever' lay not in a future remote as never, but was now, at this very moment.

He did not think this, he did not even believe it, he knew it.

'Why,' was his first conscious thought, 'is this what Dr. Gentles meant about the following wind?' If so, then his must have made up on him.

Chapter Six

DR. GENTLES had said every one had a following wind. Did that mean, then, surely it must mean, that practically everyone had made the discovery he had just made?

John looked at the passers-by thronging the busy street, noticed a man whose frown had become habitual, saw an unaccompanied woman, her expression harassed, whose lips moved, and thought how many people talked to themselves nowadays.

But if they had discovered what he had, would their frowns have become habitual, their faces drawn with harassment? He knew they would not. They were living as though it were the ticks of a clock that counted, not indestructible life. Perhaps that was why so many talked to themselves nowadays—all they could resort to was to wind themselves up instead of leaning back.

He crossed the traffic-laden street and made for the cul-de-sac where Fraser & Milward, sunk in its area, had its existence below the paving-stones.

Yet there was nothing out of the ordinary, unusual, unique, about him. Others must have had the experience he had just had, an experience so remarkable, with the permanence of 'for ever' stamped upon it, that he knew it would abide with him until the next time it came—even if that 'next time' were not in this span of life.

To think he had spoken to men and women, brushed them in the street, and been unaware what they held close. Only he did not hold it close, it held

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him. He was curious about it, had the burning desire to join the company of those who had felt what he felt.

Tom was one of his friends. If he could discuss it with anyone, that person was Tom. An ideal opportunity arose that very morning when, before lunch, Tom asked if he would help him choose a present. John was so full of what he had to say that he paid small attention to their errand.

'Tom,' he asked intimately, 'have you ever had a feeling, an extraordinary feeling? You get it just for a moment but it's so strong you know it will last until Kingdom Come. A feeling that you've been overtaken by something that's bigger, better, greater by far than you? But it doesn't crush you into insignificance. Instead it makes you feel significant, in the scheme of things, for the first time.' •

Tom was so impressed he stopped short beside him.

'Have I not?' he said, and nudged him with his elbow by way of emphasis. 'Knocks you flat, you mean. She has just to walk into the room, or you walk into a room and see her, and you're hers for life. Anyone else you've ever thought of is just a dame, a girl, a floosie, compared to her.'

As he looked into his glistening face, John made no attempt to hide his disappointment, but the other noticed nothing amiss. John knew there was no good either arguing with or contradicting him. You either knew or you didn't, it was as simple as that. And Tom didn't.

'I thought you said you wanted to go to Lyon's?' John asked assertively.

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'So I did,' said the other. 'I want a really nice, first-class article.'

'Well, what are we taking a tram for?' demanded John. 'There's a Lyon's in the Argyle Arcade.'

'We're going to their shop at Charing Cross—it's their principal one and is bigger, so they're bound to have more of a selection.'

John wondered why he should be dragged along to help to choose a present about which Tom obviously had his mind made up already. It was to be a writing-case. He did not trouble himself with the cheaper articles of imitation leather with strong zippers, but concentrated on the expensive ones, slim and fine-grained, with an address-book and everything to match that the most fastidious writer could desire.

'Well, which do you think?' he demanded combatively, opening a green one for at least the sixth time. By a process of elimination he had narrowed his choice to two: the short leet now lay between the green and a cherry one.

'Either,' decided John, masculinely helpful. 'They're both exactly the same, except that one's green and one's red. The only poor thing about them is the notepaper, because it isn't ours, but once you put that right, one's as nice as the other.'

'I'll put in our best deckle,' Tom said out of the side of his mouth that the assistant would not hear. 'Which do you think she'd like best?' he asked, now opening the red one to study its contents once more.

'Who?' asked John.

'Lennie, of course,' replied Tom.

But he did not wait for his reply, because he had already made up his own mind. The green one

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suddenly struck him as ordinary and he pushed it aside. Taking out his pocket-book, he told the assistant he would have the red case and to put it in its box.

Heavens, thought John, watching his broad face as he counted out pound notes, you're in love with Lennie, and he wanted to groan.

Tom sent it to her by post so that it arrived on the morning of her birthday, but she was so busy opening her family presents she did not notice it. Because he was so much older than she, John had always made a feature of Lennie's birthday: it had been his present, when she was small, that she had anticipated gleefully the night before, hugging herself in bed as she wondered what it would be. He had always known so much better than either of her parents what she would like. Now she was grown up, she still, through habit, opened his first.

'There's something else for you,' said Bruce, pushing over Tom's packet after she had dealt with his and their mother's, 'something through the post.'

'Now who could this be from?' asked Lennie, studying the writing.

'A fine twirly hand,' commented Bruce. 'Open it and find out.'

Lennie undid the brown paper, took the lid from the box and found the writing-case.

'It's lovely,' she said wonderingly. 'What a glorious cerise—you only get this colour in a really good thing. Whoever do you think—?' She undid the zipper, smiling at the ease with which it ran, and picked out a card tucked into the compartment for stamps. There was a little pause. 'Why,' she said, and her voice was more wondering than ever, 'it's from

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your friend, John—Tom Ritchie.' She fitted his card back into the division that Tom had already filled with a five-shilling book of stamps. 'That was good of him,' she said slowly.

John hoped, for Tom's and heaven's sake, she would keep it, not send it reeling back to him with a kindly note; but no Garnett ever told another what he thought he or she should do. They knew they could save their breath. As Tom was his jocose self when he next saw him, he presumed that whatever Lennie had done she had not hurt his feelings.

The effect of the inexplicable happening in Buchanan Street did not fade as time intervened between him and it; rather it strengthened, stabilised. That, he realised, was because it was something outside time, of the substance of eternity. If he could but talk about it to someone, link himself to those who had felt what he felt. It was like looking for one who bore the same passport as you.

Ailsa! He saw her walking down Mountview Street in front of him one evening when he was going home. Of course Ailsa would know. She was a church-goer, and all church-goers would know: that was why they went to church, to be kept and to keep in touch. For the first time he realised the significance of the world communion. That was the reason for Dr. Gentles—he was the link between what was permanent and what was passing, what was rock-bottom as a foundation-stone and higher than heaven, what found you before you knew you were lost.

Ailsa was bound to know. It was to share this knowledge with him that she used to try to prevail

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on him to accompany her to church. He had always managed to wriggle out of it, because he would have felt tied, on parade, sitting beside her in the Craig pew.

He hastened his steps once inside the close, eagerly calling her name up the stairs before her own door could swallow her. She turned swiftly to see him behind her, his face quickened, alert with what he had to say.

It was happening, what she had never dreamed would or could happen: he was going to tell her how much he had missed her, that he could not live without her. Only that could explain this look she saw on his face, a look she had never seen before. He had discovered he loved her, he was lit with the love he felt for her.

She came into her own as she waited for him to reach her, her lips parting slightly, and her trimness took on a debonair air.

'Ailsa, I had to tell you, to ask you—' He was almost breathless with what he had to tell her.

But now he was beside her, he found some of his ardour quenched, because he was feeling once more the constraint that had separated them in the past. He must stop staring at her in this inane way and come to the point, but the fact remained as plainly as Ailsa was standing before him that he was finding her much more difficult to speak to than he had found Tom.

'Well, Ailsa, it's just this—I want you to know that I know now why you go to church every Sunday. I understand now why, had we been married, you would naturally have insisted on a church wedding.'

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She did not move where she stood, but he was aware that something had happened to her, as though he had inadvertently touched a spring which made her recoil from him within herself.

'I know now why you wanted that,' he continued, his words stumbling as he realised the malignant effect they were having on her. 'I know what church must mean to you. I've felt it too—in Buchanan Street of all places. It's something you feel behind you—isn't it?—that has such force it carries you forward. You're air borne, wing borne, wind borne.'

He saw the look of complete incomprehension that chilled her features. And she saw him leaning back against the balustrade, his arms out-flung as he held the wooden rail behind him, studded with its cruel brass points. The spring snapped.

'I don't know what you are babbling about,' she said, 'and I couldn't care less. The only explanation I can think of for your most extraordinary behaviour is that this is what you call "social glow." I don't know which I detest most—you when you're yourself or not yourself.'

He stood staring at the door she had shut sharply behind her. So that was that. He had been wrong about Ailsa. She might go to church but she had never felt what he had felt. Tom had at least mistaken what he had tried to tell him, but Ailsa had not a clue what he had been talking about.

He walked upstairs to his own flat, his head bent in thought. He had better stop asking people about his experience: it was, apparently, rarer than he had imagined. If he ever happened to bump against Dr. Gentles, he would tell him. His footsteps lightened

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as he thought of that. Yes, that was the thing to do, wait until he saw Dr. Gentles. For that was the one quarter where he could be sure of not drawing a blank.

And he must tell Bruce about it, he felt he owed that to the minister. Since he was leaving on his rounds next day, he broached the subject that night when the room was in darkness.

'Do you remember what Dr. Gentles said about the following wind?' he asked. Before Bruce could reply, he had inserted, 'Well, it's true. I've felt it.'

'Felt what?' asked Bruce, his voice beginning to go up and down with drowsiness.

'That there's something behind me, bearing me on.'

'You sound exactly like a hymn,' Bruce said sleepily, 'one about banners and marching.'

'It's a remarkable feeling,' continued John. 'You feel just as though you were being accompanied.'

'Accompanied by what?'

'You'd have to feel it to know what I mean,' said John. 'But it's unmistakable when you do.'

'Well, I've never felt it, and there's no mistake about that.'

'I know you haven't,' John said argumentatively, 'but I'm telling you Dr. Gentles knows what he's talking about.' Out of the corner of his eye, he suddenly saw the small humped church at Drumban as he had seen it on their father's funeral day, standing watchful amongst its green graves. 'You were wrong about falling in love, and you're wrong about this.'

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'I don't care how wrong I am about anything,' said Bruce, 'now I'm right about love,' and his voice dreamed into oblivion.

In his car next day John passed through St. Enoch's Square, with its grimy ornate buildings. He left the city by a road that, on one side, had rows of gaunt tenements, with broken panes in their landing windows, and, on the other, shipyards. That was the characteristic of Glasgow's streets—you never knew what you might see at the end of them, a crane, the mast of a ship, blocked with more buildings or the view of a distant hill, or leading steeply into the sky.

As always, his mind eased when he saw country sights and heard country sounds. It was as though the rhythm of his thoughts took on the rhythm of unhurrying growth and maturing season. Here there was no panic of haste, of working against the clock. Time was the progression of dawn ripening into light and night enfolding from dusk.

It was a day of glancing shower and swift sunshine, the horizon bright with shafts of rainbows. Two giant horses, their shadows heaving beside them, came lunging down the field they were ploughing. It was not a monochrome to John, because every furrow of turned earth was a world in itself.

The very shadows were different from the shadows in town, where, straight, angular and uniform as the buildings that threw them, they withdrew in blocks and sections across street and pavement. Here they capered, swept and floated. The blandness of lowland hill and field was dappled with cloud shapes, every

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hummock threw its own gnomes, each hollow was cupped to its rim. The whitewashed gable of a farmhouse was patterned by a tree-ghost, shadows flecked with amber the broad waters of a Border river and stained a rough unpainted bothy door.

He did his business at the various towns on his route as far as Carlisle, but he did not spend the night there. He never did, when he could go to 'The Flock Arms', on the Scots side of the Border.

It was an unpretentious hotel which had stood at the wayside long before there had been any town of Flock, and had once been an inn. Unprotected by tree or hill, the winds cracked round it like whips, and it stood out with a boldness of silhouette that made it look larger than it was. Stripped now of its farm-outhouses and steadings, separated from its garden by the road, it presented a somewhat bald appearance, yet John never garaged his car at the back but he was aware, in the bareness and emptiness, of stir all round him. It was as though the currents of air were still disturbed by the movement of men and beasts, where travellers long ago had changed horses.

He always liked coming here. Its smell regaled him the moment he entered, the rather nice smell brewed from a combination of ale, cigarettes, furniture polish and Scotch broth. The entrance led into the oldest part of the building, where floors dipped, draughts scraped below doors and the small windows fitted in their deepest frames as though glued.

As outside he was aware of the stir of unseen departures and arrivals, so inside he seemed to hear, even when the place was as quiet as it was now, or

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perhaps the very silence tuned what he heard, brought it within earshot, the clinking and chinking of glass, tankard and mug.

He heard someone coming down the long corridor from the kitchen, and with the tap-tap of her advancing footsteps all the shut doors round him seemed to pop, as though their interiors had filled with air.

It was Miss Saunders, who was described on the accounts as proprietrix. She stood in the dark passage the same as she always looked, with her good skin, rather high colour, firm bust, and air of capability that reduced crisis to the commonplace. She stared at him across the hall not much larger than a lobby, then moved her head as though to focus better.

'Hullo, Miss Saunders,' he said. 'Don't you recognise me?'

'Mr. Garnett!' she exclaimed. 'Of course I did.' She came forward. 'I'd recognise you anywhere. But the funny thing was when I saw you standing there just now, I didn't know for a moment if it really were you, or if I were just imagining it.'

'I'm afraid I've blotted my copy-book,' he said. 'I'm late for dinner, amn't I? But I had a busy day and I wanted to come here for the night.'

'You'd have thrown a stone at this house if you hadn't come,' she assured him. 'Of course you're not too late. I'll tell Ella to get ready for you, and you go into my room for a drink.'

He went into her room, a small sanctum behind, but hidden from, the private bar. Her bureau was open for the simple reason that it was so full it could not shut. The various articles used as paper-weights, which tethered the flutter of accounts, receipts, in-

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voices, a jumper pattern, letters, forms, only seemed to add bulk to the chaos.

As he waited for her in her room he suddenly found himself wondering about Miss Saunders. All he knew about her was that she was Miss Saunders. She did not appear to have sisters or brothers, or parents. He felt she would be good to her parents had they still been alive, that they would be here with her, taking the last short, shuffling steps of the old as they moved about her home.

What did she think of when she came in here by herself? What did she feel as she sat alone in this room on a winter night, with the maids distant in the kitchen and no travellers in the house? He mooned over to the window, a side-window framing part of the courtyard. Did she like the old pump and disused trough when she looked out here each morning to see what kind of day it was?

He heard her entering the bar by the front and pouring their drinks.

'Awful if anyone ever sneezed over your desk!' he called to her. 'You know, it always surprises me.'

'What surprises you?' Her voice struck him as younger, warmer, when he heard it divorced from her common-sense appearance.

'Well, you're always so neat in your person, and everything you do is unfussy, then I see all this fluster and scramble on your desk.'

'Would it surprise you to know that that desk's run on a rigid filing-system? I guarantee I could put my hands on anything I want in a matter of moments.' She came in, the sherry glowing like jewels. 'You're later this year, Mr. Garnett. I missed you when

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you didn't come at your usual time.'

'My father died.'

'I wondered if that was what had happened. I'm sorry.'

He liked her directness; there was something very uncluttered about Miss Saunders which he found restful.

'You'll be putting a date on your wedding now,' she remarked, and she took her finger and thumb up and down her glass.

Curious how he never thought of Ailsa these days. The relief of the break had been such that no regrets linked him to her, nor nostalgic memories. When Miss Saunders mentioned his wedding, so accustomed had he become to his freedom, he had to make a conscious effort to remember that of course she would not know his engagement was broken.

'There's not going to be a wedding,' he said. 'My fiancée broke it off—mutual consent. Just one of these things.'

She held her glass by its stem.

'Just one of these things,' she said understandingly, and raised the sherry to her lips as though drinking a toast.

'There's a lot to be said for single bliss,' he ruminated over his. 'I mean, unless you get your heart's desire, you're better by yourself.'

'Much better,' she agreed.

He looked at her as she sat beside him in the comfortable upheaval of her sanctum. She would be older than he was, he supposed; but he noticed her hair for the first time, that it was the light brown of a thrush's back, quite unstreaked with grey. She

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might never marry, yet there was a fruitfulness about her, the wholesomeness of bread, that debarred one thinking of her as a spinster. He felt sure Ailsa would marry, but that would not rob her of her precision. Women, he came to the conclusion, fell into two categories: that of mother or of aunt, and whether they were married or not, had children or were childless, altered their category not one whit. Miss Saunders was a mother, Ailsa was an aunt.

'You go and have dinner now,' he heard her tell him. 'You must be hungry as a fisher. And come back in here for coffee—it's not so bleak as the lounge if it's empty.'

The curtains were drawn when he returned, and a spare table had been added as simpler than clearing a space for the coffee-tray. He enjoyed the evening, for Miss Saunders was more talkative than he had ever heard her. Used to the companionship of his family, he had all the sociability of the monosyllabic. Making no effort himself, he liked an effort being made for him, or rather appreciated the spontaneity which had no strain of effort about it.

His bedroom was in the old part of the building and when he went upstairs, at that late hour and in the windy silence, the hotel had reverted to an inn again. He heard it creaking round him like a ship. He felt that even if there were no structure left, if stone, staircase, ceiling and floor vanished in the night, there would always be an empty pocket of air here filled by what once had been.

He knew his room faced the front because he was so conscious of the road outside, although to-night it did not hollow a solitary footstep or echo one

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passing car. In the passage of the wind as it scoured the bare highway, he could feel, because ghosts could not be heard, the stumbling of stolen cattle, the tripping of marauded sheep, as they were harried from one side of the Border to the other. Driving through them came the steady patter of countless hooves as Gaelic-speaking drovers shepherded their blackfaced flocks from the past to the markets in the south.

With the adaptability of one well practised in hotel furniture, he opened the wardrobe. He had discovered that wardrobe doors should always be taken by surprise and jerked open, that their handles usually answered by being turned the wrong way. There was a rattle and clatter as a forest of wooden coat-hangers, advertising whisky, swung together. He hung his jacket on one and stooped to pick up another that had fallen into the cavernous pit of the wardrobe's interior. As he did so, his fingers felt something that was not a coat-hanger, but square and bulky. He thought at first it was a box, but knew when he had it in his hands it was a book.

He moved under the light and found what he held was a black, serviceable Bible. He opened it, wondering what it had been doing in there. Inside he found a notice in old-fashioned print earnestly requesting that those using this book should not remove it. He would have thought its size and weight would have made such an injunction unnecessary. Evidently it had been presented once-upon-a-time by some Bible Society to the hotel for the use of commercial and other travellers. The Book That Has All The Answers, the notice was headed.

He had the strangest sensation as he stood there,

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holding the uncompromising black volume. The flutter of draughts gathering under the door sounded like wings, or pages being turned. He felt as though he held in his hands not a passport but a whole country.

The immensity of it baffled him, and a reluctance, strong as superstition, took possession of him not to look inside, as though he were afraid of what he would read. But he knew he would have to do so before he put it back where he had found it.

He opened it roughly about the middle. The solid black print jumped before his eyes until they fixed on one particular verse: 'The Lord shall preserve thy going out and thy coming in from this time forth and even for evermore.'

A sigh of relief escaped him. What on earth had he thought he would find? Thy going out and thy coming in—appropriate to read that in an inn with its travellers passing in and out. As he stood in the draughty room, he suddenly felt everything was appropriate, as though life itself were the inn at the wayside, birth the arrival and death the departure on a journey you did not take alone.

In the days that followed he covered the best part of Scotland, staying each night at a different hotel. Green hills, gentle as folds, and smooth squares of fields had the simplicity of a nursery rhyme after the ballad country of the Borders, with the turbulence of its rivers, its flinty roads on which a spurred foot would ring out, its great trees, some solid enough to act as a windbreak in themselves, others standing against the horizon with the significance of a gallows.

As he travelled northwards, the daisy-white lambs

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became scarcer and he saw the sheep, old with their greyness, gathered round the farms. In the morning they trailed silver paths in the dew. Once he noticed a line of them streaming up a hill in single file, like a dyke.

This was the country of dykes, these miles of boulders that only mountain-tops defeated, acting as marches between one man's land and another's, dividing park from pasture, fold from field. Dykes that still held good although the strong hands that had built them had long since been laid to rest. Dykes whose rough continuity was broken by gaps for the sheep to jump through, whose stones were furred with moss, their crevices filled with grass or sheltering a bird's nest, with bluebells springing from them and dwarf ferns uncurling.

Here the air was virginal as a spring at its source. That always struck him, a town-dweller, as surprising about the Highlands. Where mountains were rooted in eternity, there was no gloom of the worn-out, no feeling of having reached the end of things. Instead the air had all the pristine quality of the beginning. The grass, cropped close by nibbling sheep, was the bright green of turf. Snow blanched the mountain-tops, filling corries and ravines with the dazzle of light. It was as though when the back of things was reached, you found you had come out on the obverse side, not the reverse as expected. When you reached the air itself, you discovered that old as time meant nothing was so timeless as time.

The night before he was to return on his home journey, he spent in the Caledonian Hotel. He had always come here, and, like most men, was a creature

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of habit. It was a large building, with the importance of a town hall, erected last century when moneyed travellers poured over the Border to spend their holidays in the romantic Highlands, and an air of subdued grandeur still clung to it. It reminded John of one who, although outmoded, was still to be reckoned with through sheer force of personality, and who could not be dismissed as a back-number. Indeed the Caledonian had outlasted many of its more modern rivals.

A ball was being held that night. The music of the distant orchestra was borne to him in waves as he sat after dinner in the writing-room making out his sheets and order-lists. It sounded wistful at this distance, or rather made him feel wistful. A fashionable affair, what Lennie would call a proper dance, for he had seen some of the guests, and knew this was no hop, or get-together annual.

When he went to his room, he met another of them, a girl. They walked down the length of the broad, carpeted corridor towards each other, as though they were caught in a mirror and each were the other's reflection. This feeling of inevitability was enhanced by the fact that she did not appear to walk towards him, but to be drawn, to float. That was because she must walk beautifully, he found himself thinking, as though trying to rationalise what was happening.

But there was no need for him to attempt to rationalise anything. It was rationalised for him. He was not passing an unknown girl in a hotel corridor, impassive with shut doors. This had all the firmament about it. They were two stars wheeling into the same orbit.

Chapter Seven

HE let himself into his bedroom. Even the singles were large at the Caledonian, with lofty ceilings. The one electric light he had switched on could not compete with so much empty space and, instead of dispelling cheerlessness, added to it. He noticed the elaborate fireplace, as though everything he looked at here had become significant.

It was only then that he allowed himself to think of her.

She had a bland brow and her eyes were set well apart, which gave her the candour of a flower. She was tall but not slight like Lennie, and she carried her head as though it wore a crown. Her fairness was not what was called ash blonde, the fairness of a child, nor the natural butter that peroxide can so easily travesty, but that fairness like a shine.

He paid his bill next morning at the receptionist's bureau before breakfast.

'That dance last night was a big affair,' he remarked, and he thought his heart would break as he waited to hear if he were going to discover her name. He wondered if he could bear to know it, if he were ready to hear it.

'Yes, sir,' she replied brightly. Receptionists always struck him as similar, wherever their hotel happened to be, in their black frocks, like a uniform, with their glassy manners that gave nothing away, distant as though they were at the other end of a telephone.

'A private affair,' he hazarded.

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'A private affair,' she concurred. 'Lady Serena Kuld's engagement dance.'

He went into the dining-room for breakfast, a large room with awkward pillars, on the first, not the ground floor. He chose a table at the window before the head waiter could pilot him to one behind a pillar.

He looked down at the street below him, at this hour he knew it would smell of bread, and watched a collie dog run across the road. It was the uncompromising main street of any Highland town: tweed shop, grocer, antiques, a notary's office, newsagent, china—they were all there.

He turned his attention to his fellow guests. One or two off the night trains, on their way elsewhere, some making a stay, including Americans, and a large table filled with young people, obviously from last night's celebration, who had stayed the night.

She was not one of them. He watched everyone who came in, his heart stounding at each entrance when he saw it was not she, as he knew it would have stounded if she had appeared.

The flutter of laughter, the brightness of voices, reached him from their table as the music from the orchestra had reached him last night. It was as though they belonged to another world. They knew her, were her compatriots—and he could not even have told them the colour of her dress.

But she was not enclosed by the frontiers of the world that enclosed them. No-man's-land did not stretch between him and her: each had met on the other's ground, they both sprang from the same soil and recognition had been instant. A bond bound

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them inextricably together as though their roots were joined.

He was wont to feel depressed when he arrived home from his rounds. Perhaps because he enjoyed travelling so much, his return was in the nature of reaction. And in the past something always seemed to have gone wrong in his absence, usually something to do with Ailsa. Had she known instinctively that it was a relief for him to be away on his own for a little? Also, there had been that conscious conforming of himself once more to the unbearable tempo of a sick-room.

But now there was no Ailsa to tell him her version before he went upstairs, no invalid awaiting his return. Yet he hesitated before he fitted his key in the lock. The smell of the porch, that dank chill of stone, took his mind back to his school cloakroom.

He knew the cause of his depression: it was behind him now. For the first time no-man's-land stretched between him and the girl in the hotel. That they would meet again was inevitable, but in the meantime he was shutting a door. In the pause before he turned his key in the lock, he lived again that moment in the corridor when fate hurtled like a thunderbolt upon him.

'It's nice to see you back,' his mother greeted him. 'You were away surely longer than you expected?'

He never sent word when he was on his rounds, or kept them posted about his return. Despite the freemasonry that existed between them, the Garnetts were curiously unintimate in some things.

'I was longer than I expected,' he agreed. 'There was more to do, because I was so much later.'

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'I'm glad you're back to-day,' she returned. 'Mrs. Latimer phoned up—she asked us to bridge to-morrow night, and I said you and I would be over.'

The Latimers had been the Garnetts' closest friends until Iris had married a Polish airman instead of their son. John leant against the mantelpiece and looked down at his mother. He knew both Bruce and Lennie had refused to accompany her, but that she could depend on him.

'That was nice of her—them,' he said.

'Yes,' she replied. 'The first time any of us has been in their house since Iris broke her engagement to Alan.'

'Since Iris jilted Alan,' corrected Lennie.

'We'll have to invite them back, John,' said his mother.

'We'll have to,' he backed her up, 'and both Lennie and Bruce will need to stay in that night.'

'What with the Latimers and your friend Ritchie, John, we're becoming quite sociable,' remarked Lennie.

The Latimers lived further down the street, on the opposite side. The last time John had been in their flat was at the dinner-party they had given in honour of Iris when their only son became engaged to her. It had been at the beginning of the war, before things had become difficult, when a best foot could be put foremost, and John remembered that dinner-party to this day. Nothing had been too good for the Latimers to give Iris.

He felt his mother enjoyed walking beside him down the evening street on their way to friends. She had begun to pick up threads severed when their

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father fell ill; and now met Dorothy Ferguson, an old school-friend, on the same day each week, for tea at Copland's.

'It's wireless you hear through opened windows these days,' she remarked. 'When we came to Mount-view Street at first, I remember it was girls doing their piano practice. You never hear them at it now.'

'Yes,' he said. 'Remember Iris dashing up and down her scales?' She had made even scales sound dramatic.

Mrs. Latimer answered their ring at the bell. She had the silvery hair of those who go prematurely white; now her years had made up on her, her pretty colouring and slim figure still contrived to lend her a youthfulness which her contemporary, John's mother, had long ago outgrown.

Mrs. Latimer kissed her, and shook hands with John. She told him, 'Just go in,' calling, 'Ben, Alan, here's John,' before accompanying her neighbour into a bedroom to take off her coat. The big bulky form of the son of the house hovered into the hall.

'Hullo, John.'

'Hullo, Alan.'

They had gone to the same school but had never been boon friends, for the simple reason that Alan was some years older and, in the enclosed life of school one's friendships did not extend beyond one's own class-mates.

Alan Latimer was the big burly son that some fragile women do seem to produce. His bigness had begun to spread a little. He took their guest into the lounge, saying, 'Here's John,' to his father. Mr. Latimer had a magnificent crop of grizzled hair, and

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a hearty manner that would have made the shyest feel at home. John found himself thinking, at their age, we—Bruce and me, Alan, all of us—won't have anything like the hair our fathers have to show.

'Come away, John my lad,' he greeted him. 'Have a cigarette. What's wrong with ours? Alan, see he doesn't smoke his own. I'm a pipe man myself. So will you be when you're my age.'

John could not help thinking how dull their flat was. For one thing, the Latimers, not at a corner, had front and no side windows, and being but one storey up, no connection with the sky. Even if they had been the top flat, he still felt it would not be the same sky as theirs. The long and the short of it was, the Latimers were on the wrong side of the street.

Manfully he fielded Mr. Latimer's jovial remarks as he varied his replies now his host was beginning to say the same thing twice over. The evening renewed itself when the two women joined them, cosseted expressions on their faces as they realised how welcome they were. Alan said he would take a hand when his mother went to make coffee, and the four sat down to bridge.

It was just as it used to be in the old days, thought Mrs. Garnett, listening to Mr. Latimer chanting when his king took a trick, 'The King of Clubs my shepherd is, his goodness faileth never,' and hearing Mrs. Latimer expostulate, 'Ben, stop it—don't be blasphemous.' She knew Ben would never stop it, and that it would be the end of things for his wife if he did. At ten o'clock there would be a perfect supper, everything made by their hostess herself.

Only John, her son, accompanied her instead of

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John her husband, and Alan, instead of a handsome boy in a school blazer, was beginning to look quite middle-aged.

How could Iris do it? thought the mother, following suit, leading out trumps, throwing away rags. And she remembered Alan Latimer as he had looked during the war, magnificent in commander's uniform. Yet Iris had thrown him over—no, Lennie was right, she had jilted him—for a man she hardly knew. With a sickening feeling of fatality the mother recalled her daughter entering their sitting-room at home and saying, 'This is Stanislaus, my husband.' Alan had been abroad, on service, at the time: he must have heard what had happened from his own people first.

Of course no one blamed Iris for her father's illness, everyone knew she was in no way responsible for it, but the fact remained that after he came back from across the street, after he had told the Latimers Iris was married, he had never been the same. His wife could date his protracted withdrawal, his inch by inch retreat, from that day.

But Iris *was* responsible for Alan Latimer being a bachelor, still living in his parents' home, when he should have been a husband and a father, the head of his own household.

A few nights later John and Lennie took the bus to Drumban, and went into the graveyard. That was always the procedure when the Garnetts visited the village, even before their father was buried there. After that, they had a look at the handsome square house, standing in its wide garden with a pool in the

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middle, where their grandparents had lived.

There were no Garnetts now at Drumban, their one-time home was tenanted by an unknown family, but in their day they had been people to reckon with. John wondered if men and women had been more strongly characterised then than they were now, or if the perspective of time were accountable for transmuting the ordinary into the extraordinary; instead of diminishing them, making them appear more than life-size.

The Garnetts of Drumban had been practically the first people in Scotland to own a private motor-car, which had resembled a basket-chair on wheels. They had set off for Kilcolum with the dinner-bell to clear the road for them, and were invariably towed back by a horse from Whitlaw Farm because their vehicle had broken down. They worked through a succession of early cars until they procured a Ford, which they took abroad on holiday in 1914. They returned from France without their conveyance because war had broken out. Before it ended, both made the short journey from their house to the graveyard, with its green grass and long-limbed elms noisy with rooks.

Perhaps because he had visited it as a boy, the village always struck John as the kind of place one imagined as a child and only remembered when one saw it again. Its streets were so short they were more braes and wynds, and cottage gable-end was as prominent as its front. Full of steep little hills and many blind corners, the village had grown round green and garden patch, and the paths the cattle had tracked when the communal herd drove them out to pasture. Farm-horse and rumbling cart, homeward-bound

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hay-wain with its gently swaying load, had all rutted them into permanence.

From Drumban John and Lennie walked to Brierley, where they could catch a bus back to Glasgow. On either side of them the flat countryside unfolded like a map, squared with fields, evened by distance, its colours of a patchwork brightness.

John looked at the ditch beside the road, at the coarse grass choking it. He was thinking again of a country traversed by dykes, a country dramatic after glacier, earthquake and landslide had formed mountains and hills and ranges, like ramparts standing sentinel against the sky, its turf starred with flower heads.

His thoughts were for ever returning there, because the road they retraced led him to the girl in the hotel. She was like a flower, he was thinking now, not with the tremulous, veined fragility, through which light could shine, of an anemone furling when the wind blew, but with the clear-white opaqueness of an alpine bloom, its petals wide open to circle with the sun.

He turned to ask Lennie whether she wanted to go by the path over the fields or the one through the woods, when he felt himself suddenly drawn up by the look he saw on her face, a look of such contentment it was like radiance.

Lennie! He had never thought she would know what he was talking about if he told her of his experience in Buchanan Street. Now he knew from the look on her face that she would. To think he had asked Tom, Ailsa, and not remembered her.

'Lennie,' he said wonderingly, jogging into her as though to be near her, 'you've had that feeling, haven't you, a wonderful feeling of something behind

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you, something that won't let you go?'

She did not tell him he was talking like a hymn. Instead she turned to look at him, not as though she thought he were a bit crazy, but to consider him and what he was saying.

'You mean the feeling that you're in the right place at the right moment, this very minute? Yes, I have that feeling, John. It doesn't matter about the past, just as it doesn't matter about the future. It's now that counts. That's what living is.'

And now he had found someone who spoke his language, he had not the slightest desire to discuss it further with her or anyone. He was content to know she knew.

Lennie of all people—he had never thought of her, yet he wondered why she had not been the first. He understood so much now about her. She liked the even tenor of her days. The daily classes she was attending to learn to cook properly had become part of the pattern she sustained without effort. Nothing was too simple for her, this walk in the country for instance: the ordinary was what stimulated her. She asked nothing better than every day from which to weave the fabric of her life. Stir, happenings, events, were all outside her, interruptions to her inner tranquillity, dissonance forced on her from without. What she had was not happiness, for happiness hung on the word hap, and this had a security, a serenity, which did not depend on chance. It was too active to be described as peace. The nearest John could get to it was the word joy.

The following evening, before Bruce turned on the wireless to hear the nine o'clock news, the sound

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of a car-door was heard to slam in the street below. Lennie looked up from the book she was reading.

'That's a taxi,' she remarked, turning a page.

'It'll be Ailsa home from somewhere or other,' said Bruce.

Their mother suddenly rose from her chair at the fireside where she was sewing and went to the window. Whether it were Ailsa or not, she did not say. No one paid any attention when she left the room, thinking, if they thought at all, that she had gone for more darning. Bruce stretched himself, yawned and lounged towards the wireless.

It was a wet night, and John realised the outer door must be open, for the rain battering on the building's glass roof suddenly filled the house. There was a cry outside in the hall, a cry from their mother, and someone sobbed.

'Turn off the wireless,' Lennie said shortly

They waited, the three of them, in the familiar room. Someone shut the front door and the sound of the rain on the glass roof was instantly silenced, thus sealing the house in itself again.

They knew before she entered who it was. When she stood in the doorway, more herself than they had even imagined, she met their hostility like a visible barrier.

'I've come home,' said Iris.

'So we see,' remarked Lennie.

'You mean you've come back,' said Bruce.

John's memory of Iris was a brother's of a sister, the inborn memory of one he had taken for granted

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as all those with whom one grows up are taken for granted, like sheaths of one's experience. She was two years older than he, so that in their very earliest days he had been dependent upon her; but although the girl, with all the push and prerogative of the eldest, had always taken the lead, she had in reality been more dependent on him than he had ever been on her. He had been her ear, her other self.

There had been little real intimacy between the parents and their children, thus the children were thrown on each other for companionship and the barter of confidences. Every emotion that crossed Iris's impressionable mind she related to John, as though it had the fixity of obsession. He could see her, with her bare brown legs, on the shore at St. Andrews, her dark hair tousled above her plain child's face, her hand plucking at her bright print frock. 'It's your heart you feel things with, isn't it, John? That's what "with all my heart" means.' 'John, don't tell anyone but I'm in love with Mr. Cuthbert. Don't be silly, of course I know there's a Mrs. Cuthbert. You just can't help these things. It comes to you without the asking. And although he can never say anything to me, I know Mr. Cuthbert's in love with me.' 'John, let's make our minds a blank and see what happens.'

He had not, of course, thought of her as plain in those days, he had not thought of her as anything but his sister Iris. Just as when they grew up he never consciously thought of her as the prettiest girl in the street. But he had been aware, probably because she was so well aware of it herself, of the effect she had on others. She had only to enter a restaurant to cause every man to look her way, an effect that was not

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achieved by presence or carriage, because she was small, but because of a superabundance of vitality. One felt that if even one of her hairs were cut from her head it would still be imbued with her personality.

What was she like now? How had she worn? After all, it was only eight years since they had last seen her. Still the same perfect small figure, the same great eyes that lit her face like lamps, the same pretty dark hair revealing the good shape of her head. Yet she was not quite as John remembered her, and this realisation shook him, as though in some way she had let him, their side, down. He could not say what had changed, unless it was that something about her had dimmed. He sensed tension where before there had been vitality. Instead of Lennie's vibrant quality, Iris was the vibration.

'John, darling John.'

She had always been the only demonstrative one of the family. Now, as she came towards him, he felt ashamed of his feeling of disappointment in her. She was still and always would be Iris, his sister. He hugged her, and she embraced him. He felt her clinging to him.

Whether this was because she knew neither Bruce nor Lennie would allow her to cling to them, or to show them she was all in all to John, or because she was genuinely fond of him, he could not say. He remembered again that this was what complicated one's attitude to Iris—one was never quite sure why she did a thing. Her tragedy was that she was never quite sure herself. Her actions and motives did not well from the spring of her thoughts like Lennie's

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did. Iris was often so far away from her source that she lost her way back.

'Where's your other self?' demanded Bruce.

'Do you mean Stanislaus?' said Iris. She paused that her next words might be given full import and thus shame him. 'Stanislaus is dead.'

Bruce's expression said plainer than words, 'So that's why you've come back.'

'Oh, my poor dear Iris,' cried their mother. 'Stanislaus was young. He shouldn't have died, he shouldn't.'

'It was quite the most terrible thing that has ever happened to me,' she said.

'It should be,' frowned Bruce. His sister's dramatisation was bad enough, but when she dramatised the dramatic, he felt he could bear her even less.

'It was an accident, mother,' said Iris, her voice huskening with no effort on her part. 'A motor accident. It was instantaneous—that was the only blessing. They got in touch with me, and I had to identify him.' She covered her face with her hands.

'It was worse for you than for him, Iris,' John tried to comfort her. 'He didn't know. You did. You must remember that.'

'I'll never get over it—never,' she said, her voice muffled by her hands, and she rocked herself where she sat. 'Then I got your cable about father. That seemed the end of things.'

'It was an end you should have foreseen for some time,' said Lennie. 'We didn't stop writing, although you did.'

'Don't see how you make out Pop's death was the end of things,' confirmed Bruce. 'You must have

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known for long enough from our letters that it was a miracle he lasted so long.'

'Why didn't you write, Iris?' asked her mother. 'It was cruel, wicked of you not to write.'

Iris lifted her face from her hands, and at that moment John saw her look unbelievably old.

'I don't know,' she said. It was the first simple thing they had heard her say. 'I just couldn't. That's all.'

Their mother put her arms round her and held her close.

'Well, darling, you're home now,' she said, 'and that's all that matters.'

'Yes,' agreed Iris, 'I'm home now, where I belong, amongst you all again. It's all just as it was.'

'You'll have to go into the spare-room,' remarked Lennie, in her level voice, as though to draw attention to something that decidedly would never be as it was.

'I want my own room,' said Iris, with the emphasis of one staking her rightful claim. 'It's only natural I should want my own room.'

'Your bed was taken down,' Lennie informed her, 'ages ago, when you left for good. It's my room now.'

'What does it matter which room you have,' their mother wanted to know, 'as long as you're home?'

John could see that it mattered a great deal to Iris. In the past she had always been the dominant one. Now she was faced, not with the fourteen-year-old Bruce and the still younger Lennie whom she had left when she sailed to Canada, but an unknown adult brother and sister.

'I'll come and help you get the spare-room ready,'

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Lennie said to their mother in a laborious voice which implied they would both have their hands full to achieve that.

'No, dear, I'll easily manage,' their mother said briskly. 'You get a meal ready. Iris must be hungry, aren't you, dear? Of course you must be. Iris is very hungry—something nice and hot,' they heard her say to Lennie as they left the room together.

Bruce followed, to discuss the latest developments with Lennie in the kitchen. John knew that each would spend the time horrifying the other afresh as still another aspect of the situation presented itself to them.

He waited for Iris to speak. Outside a rough wind, boisterous as winter, slapped down the street, banging at the windows, slamming unwary doors. In the draught of its passage the trees shook and shivered and lisped.

'John,' she said, 'how shabby everything is.'

He was so surprised he jerked where he sat.

'Shabby?' he answered, looking round. 'Is it, Iris?'

'This room hasn't been painted since I've been away. Do you remember how annoyed Pop was when I got them to paint everything cream in here instead of brown?'

'We've had more to think of than getting this room done up,' he remarked.

She did not take his words as a rebuke, but rose and crossed to the front windows.

'Everywhere is shabby,' she insisted. 'I didn't recognise Mountview Street at first. It never used to look like this.'

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'That's because of the effects of the war,' he said leniently. 'Air-raids, railings removed, the bombed-out from Clydebank billeted in every empty flat the corporation could requisition. None of these factors can be said to have a beneficial effect on property.'

But even as he spoke he wondered if, had Mount-view Street been exactly as when Iris saw it last, it still would not have failed her. In her absence her imagination had coloured and painted it until her picture bore small resemblance to the reality. She was remembering it in the years when everything had been enchanted. Days of fog, with the horns warning hoarsely from the Clyde, had been obliterated completely from her memory. When she thought of winter at home she thought of snow, spare and white, flying past against the blackness of the close-mouth, of frost glittering on road, bare-branched tree and railing, of snow tracing out some details on buildings and muffling others, until the familiar was transformed into something breathtakingly strange and wonderful.

'John,' she asked, her face turned in the direction of the Latimer home down the street, 'what about Alan?'

Deliberately he misread her question.

'Alan?' he repeated, allowing his voice to go quite flat. 'He came back from the war, all right.'

'Of course he did, I know that,' she said impatiently. 'I didn't go away until after the war. I mean—has he married?'

He took as long as he could before replying.

'No,' he said at last, 'he hasn't.'

He hated the look of satisfaction he saw take possession of her face, because it was like triumph.

Chapter Eight

'I'll be seeing you at the house to-night,' remarked Tom as he and John climbed the area stairs from Fraser & Milward.

It was a second or two before John realised that Tom meant by this he would be visiting the Garnett flat that evening.

'Will you?' he heard himself ask weakly.

'Yes,' Tom informed him. 'I'm taking Lennie a run.' Since they were meeting again within a couple of hours he did not bother to say his customary two words of leave-taking, but merely nodded on parting.

John felt slightly winded by this piece of information. It meant that Tom had been in touch with Lennie about to-night, and that she had said she would go.

Their mother was out and Iris had just left when he saw their visitor's car draw up outside. Tom, his hands in his pockets, hove over to the front windows beside him whenever he entered the room.

'I was asking Tom if he had met Iris on the stairs,' remarked Lennie.

'I met no one but myself, he replied.

'Our prodigal sister,' commented Bruce. 'Some people change their religion, but Iris is going one better. She would. She's re-changing hers.'

'That's where she has gone this evening,' Lennie explained to their visitor, 'to see Dr. Gentles about returning to the fold of her fathers.'

John noticed that they had accepted Tom: he was

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one of them; just as he noticed Tom took this attitude for granted, and fitted into it without question.

'It's something of a mixed blessing having her home, isn't it?' he now asked good-naturedly. This was one of those moments when he looked as though he were enjoying what he was cogitating, for his eyes were spicy.

'She's about as restful as a burst pipe in every room she enters,' Bruce told him darkly.

'I've just got on to her and Dr. Gentles,' Lennie announced with sudden clarity. 'And things aren't going too well for her at all. Dr. Gentles is saying to her he would prefer a good Roman Catholic any day to a poor Protestant.'

'That'll be a blow for Iris's pride,' ruminated Tom. He accepted Lennie's faculty of tuning-in as naturally as though he had known her all her life.

'It sure will,' agreed Bruce. 'She thought of her soul as the battleground, with the Pope versus Dr. Gentles charging each other across it.'

He left with Lennie and Tom. John watched him go down the street with his golf-clubs, to call for Jack Kerrow: it was always golf with Bruce, he had never gone in for team games. Lennie and Tom climbed into the waiting small grey car which was out of sight before it was out of earshot.

Not long after he saw Iris: she was unaware that he was looking down at her and from her expression he knew Lennie's pronouncement was true. The interview with Dr. Gentles had not been in the least like what she had anticipated, but her own family were quite the last to whom she would ever reveal her personal casualties. So her voice was quite gay when

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she called out, 'Anyone at home?'

'I am,' he called back.

He sensed before she entered the room that she was disappointed she had not the house to herself.

'All alone?' she asked, throwing her hat on one chair and hunching herself into another.

'Yes,' he replied. If anyone had to be at home, he knew she was glad it was he. 'How did you get on?'

'All right,' she answered, as though surprised at the question. She lit a cigarette: in Mrs. Boag's language, Iris smoked like a chimney, unlike Lennie who did not smoke at all. 'Really very well,' she emphasised, warming herself by her own conviction. She blew out a puff of smoke and by the time it had evaporated he could see she had begun to believe what she said. 'John, aren't Bruce and Lennie,' she frowned as she spoke of them, 'simply abominable? I'm sure we were never like that at their age.'

'What do you mean by abominable?'

'You know perfectly well what I mean. Bruce is so rude.'

'You mean, he says what he thinks. Home truths always sound ruder than any other kind of truths, Iris. You see, you've been out of the house for a good while, haven't you? Lennie and Bruce are no longer the children you left. They're not going to defer to you, if that's what you mean.'

'I don't want deference,' she repudiated indignantly. 'As for Lennie—I can't get near her.'

It might have been Ailsa speaking.

'You're her sister,' he replied. 'You shouldn't have to get, you should be near her.' He knew the effect

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Iris had on Lennie, when the very force of her personality broke up the household's rhythm. The younger girl felt her presence like depredation on the unity she held close.

'She won't let me.'

'It's not a case of letting you, Iris. She has just grown up in your absence, that's all. She's no longer your small sister. After all, you made the break, didn't you? You never even wrote during these past two years and mighty seldom before that. Well, you can't expect things to be the same, just when you want the break patched up.'

'You and mother are exactly the same to me,' she replied to that. But he saw her thoughts were no longer occupied with Bruce or Lennie. 'I'm so glad they're all out,' she said. 'I want to make a phone call.'

He realised, so far as Iris was concerned, that he was still her other self: she would pretend to him no more than she would pretend to herself. In the quietness of the house she picked up the telephone in the hall and put through a western number.

'Alan,' he heard her voice breathe. 'I'd know your voice anywhere. It's Iris speaking. Alan, could I see you? That's why I've come home—to see you—once. I ask it from my heart for old-time's sake. Any time will do—any day—but make it as soon as possible, for my sake. Yes, to-morrow evening. How good you are, Alan. I'll be looking out for you then, and will run down whenever I see you.'

John knew she was as sincere as Iris could be. She might have memorised what she was going to say, but her voice, with its little breaks and starts, was not

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feigned. He realised that, while she was speaking, her heart was in her mouth. Everything hung for Iris on her meeting with Alan Latimer to-morrow.

The car that drew up outside No. 51 the following evening was a good model, but with nothing ostentatious or spiv-like about it; dark, not one of the new what Lennie called lingerie colours.

Alan was standing beside it when Iris joined him. He did not shake hands with her, but she did not expect anything so formal, not from Alan Latimer, when she remembered that at their last meeting she had been in his arms.

In a matter of moments they had left Mountview Street, and Iris thought frantically, everything will depend on his first words, they'll be my cue, the indication of his feelings.

'Well,' he said, 'where do you want to go? What do you want to do? Somewhere smart?'

She had been prepared for bitterness. How many times had she not told herself she must be prepared for a bitterness that seared. What she was not prepared for was this matter-of-fact flatness. She might have been the girl-over-the-way he was taking out in his car for the first time. Whether this were a propitious sign or a bad omen, she was too strung up to judge: she only knew that it slightly discomposed her while she adjusted herself to it.

'Nowhere smart,' she said with decision. 'Really nowhere at all, Alan. I only wanted to see you, to speak to you—that's all.'

'What about Kilcolum then?' he enquired, referring to a small village some fifteen miles away.

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'There's a quiet howff there where we can have coffee.'

Her silence conveyed her acquiescence. She had hoped he would suggest stopping the car in some lonely place, where she could talk her heart out to him as they sat side by side. The quiet howff at Kilmolum was quite the last tryst she would have chosen for such a purpose, but she did not need to remind herself that beggars could not be choosers.

When she had seen him waiting for her beside his car, the first thing she had been aware of was his commanding height, his dependable shoulders. Now she stole a look at him, as though to confirm what he really was like.

His profile, beneath his soft hat, revealed his strong good features: he was as handsome as he used to be. The fact that he was a little fuller in the face, his body slightly heavier, only made him more impressive to Iris. He had now the assurance of settled success about him. To Iris, whose life had been anything but settled since she had left home, he had all the attributes of a god, considerable, absolute, measured.

'I'm a widow now, Alan,' she managed to say. There were some things she would have to tell him when they were sitting side by side, not face to face in a tea-shop.

'So Mrs. Garnett told mother,' he replied in an even voice, as though they were discussing a tennis match.

Again she was torn, uncertain whether his imperturbability were a good or a bad sign, if it augured well for her or the reverse. It could so easily be either.

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Even his voice held all the impersonality of a distant god.

'Did she?' she faltered, now wondering what her mother had said to his, and wishing she had not complicated things for her daughter.

'Yes, she did,' Alan continued in the same considering way. She remembered now that he had always been on the slow side compared to her, who had been there and back before he had left the mark. 'Mrs. Garnett had asked us over for bridge, you see, and she cancelled it when you came home.' He was looking steadily before him.

'Of course,' she replied.

'Of course, even if we hadn't been invited to 51,' he went on, 'Mrs. Garnett would still have phoned mother to tell us you were back.'

She must really direct the conversation out of this family blind alley. After all, this concerned two people and two people alone—herself and Alan.

'It was a motor accident, wasn't it?' he asked.

'Yes,' she replied, eager with relief that he, not she, had switched the topic. 'It was hideous, Alan. A bad bit of the road, and he swerved over the verge into a tree.'

'Were you with him?'

It revived her to hear that his thoughts were of her.

'No, he was by himself. They—they sent for me to identify him. You see, Alan, we were no longer living together when—it happened. I want you to know that, I feel you should know it. We had separated, were living in different towns. Alan, I don't know what madness came over me to marry him. I think it must have been because I was sorry for him.'

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He—they all had—the Poles who came over here—been through so much. That is the only reason why I married him—because I knew I could make a difference to him. He had lost everyone of his own. He had no one but me, and I felt I couldn't fail him. It was pity, not love, that made me do it. I may have thought they were the same, because I pitied him so. It's only truthful to say that. But now I know, I knew the moment it was too late to undo what I had done, that there is only one man I ever have loved, ever could love—and that is you.'

She felt lightened after she had said what she had made up her mind to say. Her relief was such that for the first time she relaxed where she sat beside him. The fact that she had found it easier than she had anticipated had made the effort no less formidable, like climbing a dangerous hazard only to find the descent on the other side child's play.

'I knew at once what a mistake I had made.' There was something helpful, because it was receptive, about his silence and she found no difficulty filling it, a silence which she felt was not so much preoccupied with the past as retentive of the present. 'That pity wasn't enough to found a marriage on. We could never have been truly one—there was too much separating us, our upbringing, our outlook, even our religion. Although I became a Catholic, it was always alien to me. I can't tell you what a relief it was, what a weight it lifted from me, when I told Dr. Gentles I was coming back to where I belonged—to my own church. I never realised what it meant to me, what a heritage it is, until I tried to force myself to believe what it doesn't teach.'

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She had told him everything now that she had set out to tell him. Nothing was left for her to do except to hear what he had to say, what he made of it all. Her future lay in his hands.

Kilcolum was one of those villages only Scotland can produce. It appeared to consist of one row of cottages and small two-storeyed houses which sprang from the causeway as it climbed a brae. They all faced a large communal green. Blinks of their back gardens could be seen down long narrow lobbies, like looking through the wrong end of a telescope, when their spy-holes of doors were open.

One of the cottages bore a plaque to commemorate the fact that it had been the birthplace of a famous missionary. His name raised no echo in modern ears, but the village he had once dreamed of, exiled in Africa, was practically the same to-day. For the features that he remembered were still there: the three-cornered green where children played now as they had played then, and the narrow ridged fields of cultivation. Rough scrub-land lapped it round until taken over by moor proper, so that in the distance the dwellings still looked like outcrop in the waste; and the few stunted trees continued to grow with the vigour of hedges, as though since height were denied them by the gruff winds all their growth went into width.

The howff was a tea-shop in one of the two-storeyed houses. The tea-room, down the uneven corridor to the back, led into a garden over-grown, like most old country gardens, with bushes. It was planted out with small tables where customers could sit when the chancy Scots climate permitted. As it was not a

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particularly inviting evening, all were empty. Now Iris knew why he had brought her here—because they could be by themselves.

‘Well,’ he was asking, so tall above her smallness he sounded remote, ‘where do you want—inside or out?’

‘Outside, I think,’ she said, and moved with sureness into the garden.

She sat at one of the small tables and waited for him, while he gave their order. The garden smelt of earth. Whether she were going to remember it as old-world or choked with last year’s growth, she did not know. She watched Alan stoop his head under the low lintel of the door, and come towards her. He was so much as she remembered him that she took heart, and when Iris took heart she bounded from hope to belief.

He sat down opposite her, but the table was so small they were near as touching. He looked into her eyes across it. Steadily she looked back at him.

‘You’re just the same,’ he said heavily.

Ardour lit her face.

‘That was what I was thinking about you,’ she returned.

He gave a short half-laugh.

‘I’m quite different,’ he said. ‘I’ve put on weight, for one thing. But you’re just the same. Glowing like a firefly—just as you used to glow.’

‘You’re not different to me, Alan. You’ll always be the same to me.’

A girl served them, from a bumpy tray on which everything jumped. The clatter she made was mini-

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mised because it was outside: the sounds hung in the air like separate notes of music. Iris saw him still looking at her when, once more, they were alone.

'Why haven't you married, Alan?' It was easy to put such a question, embraced by the unswerving allegiance of his gaze.

Again he gave that short laugh, as though he came to the end of it half-way. She could not remember it in the past. Poor Alan, what she owed him. She must spend her whole life making atonement to him.

'Why haven't I married?' he repeated, as though to confirm it really was he they were discussing, and she saw him shake slightly his broad shoulders. 'I suppose because of you, Iris. I've never been able to get you out of my head.'

That was Alan's way of saying he could not get her out of his heart.

'I can't tell you what I feel about everything,' she said, her voice palpitating. 'I know what I did to you. Don't think I don't know, Alan. I'll never forgive myself to the end of time.'

'That's an old song now. Plenty of water has flowed through the mill since then.'

She did not know why these ordinary words should have the power they had to disquieten her, as though he thought the old song were such a thing of the past it could never be revived. He had always been amiable of course, easy-going; and he sounded amiable enough now. Yet it was as though she received warning that his very amiability might penetrate deeper than either cynicism or bitterness.

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'You must have felt your husband's death,' he was remarking now.

'Of course I did. It was terrible.' She felt she should not have been called upon to repeat that. 'Although all we shared when he was killed was his name.' She sighed fitfully 'I'm reverting to my unmarried name now I'm home.'

She saw his gaze flicker on to her hands: he was looking to see her rings: she wore none. He unwrapped a biscuit from its coloured paper.

'A pity you didn't make a success of your marriage,' he said. 'That was the only way you could have put right what happened before.'

Criticism always found her unprepared to receive it: it was unexpected from any quarter but unheard of from the Alan she remembered. Only she must bear in mind that she was no longer dealing with the Alan she remembered. An older Alan was now dealing with her.

'It wasn't my fault our marriage wasn't a success,' she retorted. 'I have nothing to reproach myself for. I gave up everything for him.'

'I thought you said you had left him.'

'I left him no more than he left me. We parted because we both knew we had come to the end.'

He was playing with the piece of coloured paper, pinching it into shape, making something out of it with his sailor's fingers. She remembered he used to be adept at it in the past, when he had ringed her plate entrancingly with butterflies and ballet dancers, giraffes and harlequins.

'Unlikely for a Roman Catholic, who doesn't believe in divorce.'

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She saw his big fingers place before him an unmistakable tricorne, a cocked hat. Swiftly he looked at her, and she was trapped, for swiftness was not a characteristic of his.

'He committed suicide, didn't he?' he said.

She felt violently sick. How dare Alan Latimer say to her what she had never allowed herself to think even for a moment, lest such a thought should leave even a shadow on her consciousness, and thus give that shadow power to spread. She gripped the table between them: either it or her hands were icy cold.

'Stanislaus didn't take his life,' she said.

If she asserted it strongly enough she would make it true, force everyone to know it was true; but he swept aside her words almost casually as though they were so many dead leaves.

'What had he to live for, when you left him in a country where he had no one but you?' he asked.

'I tell you it was a bad bit of road.' Her voice was strident with feeling. 'They're doing something to it after—after Stanislaus's accident. That will prove to you it wasn't what—' her words fumbled in her haste to pour them out, to swamp what he was saying, but even so she could not manage the phrase he had used, 'what you said it was.'

'It proves to me nothing of the kind,' he returned.

He felt for his cigarette-case, opened it, put it on the table between them and took one himself. She knew now that the spell which had bound Alan Latimer to her for all these years was broken, and she had broken it herself. She no longer haunted his heart or head. The flame from his lighter flickered on his

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face until he clicked it shut with his capable thumb. He saw her watching him.

'Even you can't make yourself believe that,' he demurred.

She stood up.

'You'll take that back; you'll take back every word of what you've just said.'

Urgency wrenched at her. The knowledge that Alan would never have anything to do with her was negligible compared to this—that he should retract what he had said. Nothing mattered now, in this world or the next, except that—nothing.

He looked at her, surprised at the force with which she had spoken.

'I take nothing back,' he replied. Their eyes met, and it was she who was forced to look away. 'Do you want to go now? All right, Iris.'

A sudden spurt of wind lifted the little cocked hat from their table. It wandered aimlessly in the air before alighting on one of the unpruned bushes that choked the garden.

She gazed out of the kitchen window into the back-greens below, where the grass sprouting through the bald earth was like verdigris. Was this the home she had remembered when she had been away? No, a thousand times no.

Everything was different since she had lived here, it simply was not the same place. Rain spattered into a puddle and rat-tatted against the dust-bin lids. If she looked out of the front windows, what would she see? Not the buildings she remembered, serene in

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their own dignity, facing one another across a spacious road, benignant under the blue sky of summer. It was summer now but all the sky that could be seen was livid. The street was like a canyon, down which the winds whipped, where the very houses looked angry seen through the flailing rain.

She waited until everyone had gone to bed except her eldest brother.

'John,' she asked him, 'what about Pop's will?'

'Father's will?' he repeated, as though to make sure he was hearing right. 'What about it, Iris? You mean what was in it? He left everything to mother, of course.'

She knelt on the hearthrug, holding out her hands to the electric fire she had just plugged in.

'It was very short,' John continued with some firmness. 'He made it months before he died. Naturally he had to revoke his earlier one, in which he remembered us all in the days he had more to leave.'

'Where did the money go?' asked Iris, staring down intently at the fire with its one bar lit.

'I'll tell you where it went,' said John. 'On father. You realise that for years he wasn't at business. That meant he was living off capital. And capital after the war is not what it was before it. Over and above, illness has its own expenses.'

'I thought you got all that kind of thing free in Britain nowadays,' said Iris.

'No,' John told her briefly, 'we don't.' He looked at her back as she knelt on the hearthrug. 'Are you short of money, is that it, Iris?' he asked. 'But what about your share of the trust?' Surely she had not gone through that.

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'What did you do with your share?' she asked.

'Put it into my business,' he replied promptly.

'That's what I did with mine,' she said. 'Put it into a hat-shop.'

'Heavens, Iris,' he protested. 'Stanislaus was in the same job all along, wasn't he?'

'Yes. He had the same job all along. It was teaching languages.' It was as though, if she kept her voice quiet enough, she felt it would not fan memories into life.

'Well, couldn't you have put your money into something you could both have run?' When she made no reply, he asked carefully, 'How much did you manage to save out of the hat-shop?'

'My fare home.'

It took him a moment or two to digest this unpalatable piece of news.

'And now you're home, what do you propose to do?' he demanded.

Somewhat to his surprise, he discovered Iris's plans were cut and dried.

'Do you remember Rhoda Henderson?' she asked. He remembered her as one of his sister's school friends, a big clumsy-looking girl with gentle manners, as though she were for ever mutely apologising for her awkwardness. 'Well, she opened up a Scots Tea Shop in London. Now she's making a good thing out of it, and she's anxious for me to go in with her.'

'And how much would you need to put into the Scots Tea Shop?'

'Nothing. It's more than paying its way. That's not why Rhoda wants me to join her. But if I go in

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with her, we could more or less run it between us, instead of with the part-time staff she employs now, who only turn up on time when they're paid.'

'You want something to go down to London?' he asked briskly.

'Yes, John, I'll need something.'

'How much, Iris?'

'Could you make it two hundred? I won't use it all, or anything like it, but I must know it's there.'

'Right,' he settled. 'I'll make it two hundred.'

She despatched a telegram by telephone to Rhoda Henderson before breakfast next morning. Thereafter trunk calls from and to Iris followed in such rapid succession that the household was strung to a tension upon which she alone thrived. Within a week's time she was having her last breakfast with her family before she left by the night train.

'Before I go,' she announced, with her air of letting them into a state secret, which Bruce found irritating in the extreme, 'I want you to know: I'm going to keep to my married name after all.'

'Naturally,' he retorted. 'A name that no one can pronounce or spell and is so foreign it sounds like a sneeze is much more interesting to carry about with you.'

'It has nothing to do with being interesting,' she told him airily. 'I'm a married woman, and I don't see why I shouldn't bear my husband's name—that's all.'

'No one else sees why you shouldn't either,' commented Lennie.

Iris's colour changed. Like all intense people she had difficulty separating what she thought from what

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she said, while what she meant to say often had the reality of speech with her. Now she realised from Lennie's words that she had not told them, when she returned home at first, that she had every intention of reverting to her single name; as John, behind the *Glasgow Herald*, knew she would have done had her meeting with Alan Latimer been successful.

'I take it you prefer to be Madame rather than plain Mrs. Sneeze,' said Bruce.

Iris chose to ignore him.

'Another thing,' she said, 'I've thought it all out, and I'm going to remain a Catholic after all. I feel there's more solace in their religion for me than in Protestantism.'

'Two to one on the Roman stakes,' muttered Bruce below his breath.

'What's that you're saying, Bruce?' asked Iris, now feeling free to cross swords with him.

'Look,' said John, putting down the newspaper, 'don't you think we could have one breakfast, since it's Iris's last, without a fight?'

'It would be nice if we could,' put in their mother. 'There will be no need, of course, to tell Dr. Gentles that you've changed back again, Iris.'

'I certainly won't be telling him,' said her daughter, aggrieved that her mother could have thought of such a thing.

'No need at all,' corroborated Bruce. 'You may be back in the Protestant camp the next time you're home, for all anyone is to know, so why confuse him with your spiritual pilgrimages to Mecca and the Holy See in between times?' The telephone bell shrilled suddenly from the hall. 'That' will be a per-

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sonal call for you,' he said to her with the weight of prophecy, 'from Hampstead three double—'

Iris returned almost immediately.

'It's a Tom Ritchie to speak to you, Lennie,' she said. Combatively she looked across the table at her younger brother. 'So you were wrong, Bruce. You often are, you know.'

'I hope you'll pay Rhoda Henderson for some of those trunk calls to you once you get to London,' he said. 'After all, you've taken good care to have all yours to her on the house. Our telephone account must fairly have rocketed within these last few days.'

'I'd like to know what *you* don't have on this house,' she retorted. 'I was asking mother, and she says you don't pay a penny towards it and never have.'

Before Bruce could retaliate, Lennie had entered to announce:

'Personal call for you, Iris, from Hampstead.'

'The queen bee has begun to sting,' Bruce informed them when she left the room, 'just because I won't dance attendance on her.' He stood up, as he always did, to gulp down his last cup of tea. 'Of all people, to criticise me for not paying towards the house.'

'I don't think it's a bad idea, Bruce, now you've got your rise,' said John.

Bruce was so thunderstruck by this suggestion that he stopped half-way to the door.

'What do you mean?' he demanded.

'What I say,' said his brother. 'It's surely simple enough to understand.'

'My rise,' countered Bruce. 'You talk as if it were manna from a bountiful heaven, a thrilling

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unexpected windfall, a gift dropped on my doorstep by Maitland, Steele & Co. out of the generosity of their hearts, when you know perfectly well it's the least they can give me, that it has taken me years to make up on it——'

'And that it's so small,' Lennie finished for him, 'you might as well not have had it.'

John accompanied his sister in the taxi to the station that night. All Iris could say about Glasgow taxis was that they had four wheels.

She could have wished the driver had not passed the Latimer home. There were several other routes he might have taken, and thus not reminded her of what she chose to forget. To have married Alan Latimer after all that had happened—what triumph that would have brought her in front of her family, what *éclat* before the world, and esteem for herself.

She looked back at Mountview Street as the vehicle swung round the corner: how dull it looked, the kind of place where nothing could ever happen, and how glad she was to see it behind her. The street where Alan would live out the rest of his life, because no one would ever fill for him the place she had once held in his heart.

John discovered she was travelling south by first-class sleeper. He believed a gift should have neither tags nor riders attached to it, but now felt constrained to say, 'You'd better look after your two hundred, as no one has "back to come" these days.'

'Of course I will, John,' she said, 'you know I will. It's only a loan—just until I get on my feet.'

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Then I'll send it back to you—every single penny of it. Oh, John, London's going to be exhilarating. To think I'm going to live there, right in the stir of things. I'd rather have London than anywhere.'

Framed in the square of the first-class window, he saw she had forgotten all about him as she kindled herself with the thought of London.

Chapter Nine

A TRUNK call told them Iris had arrived safely at her destination, and they received one letter which was ecstatic about the goodness of Rhoda, the charm of the Scots Tea Shop, and the marvels of London, where she felt she could breathe. Rhoda apparently had recently become engaged to Bob Fordyce—John would know who he was, as his younger brother Colin had been in his class at school. After that, there was silence from Iris.

She had left Glasgow in the middle of the Fair, the annual holiday when works and factories closed, furnaces were banked out and the city emptied: Lennie always enjoyed Glasgow during the Fair. Then the uncrowded streets seemed to widen, become spacious, and the horizon, unblurred by smoke, to extend and amplify. The rarefied atmosphere affected even the buildings, making the good stand out and enhancing the mediocre. In the west end the trees were in full leaf, catching the light amongst their foliage, so that each looked as though it were illuminated separately with an intense green.

Life swung back for them all into the rhythm out of which Iris's disturbing presence had jarred them. Neither Bruce nor Lennie hid from each other that they hoped they would see little of her. 'Although, mark my words,' Bruce said forebodingly, 'she'll be home whenever she gets fed up with London. As she will get fed up, being Iris.' 'I know,' agreed Lennie, 'the only thing that's going to save us is that she hated being back amongst us all again.'

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Before they heard further from their eldest sister, John went south, on business, to investigate the possibilities of opening a branch of Fraser & Milward in London. The prospect did not appeal to him particularly; now that Mr. Fraser was retiring at the end of the year, he considered he had enough on his hands without further commitments. But he realised that this was a personal opinion, which he kept to himself when he saw how enthusiastic both Tom Ritchie and Braithewaite, their London representative, were with the project.

'You'll be able to see Iris then,' Lennie said promptly when she heard of his intended visit.

'She's been away six weeks,' propounded Bruce. 'You're just going to arrive when the newness is beginning to wear off the broom and Iris finds it's exactly the same as any other one.'

'Just,' agreed Lennie, 'when the gilt is beginning to peel from the Scots Tea Shop gingerbread. Are you writing to say you're coming, or phoning?'

'I can tell you her telephone number, and save you looking it up,' Bruce said helpfully. 'Hampstead three double—'

John was secretly of the opinion that they were right and that he would arrive to find everything had begun to pall on Iris. He was surprised, therefore, when he saw she was keyed to a high note of exhilaration, as though all were well with the world—or rather herself, for Iris was her world.

The Scots Tea Shop was a slice of a building in a crowded thoroughfare. When you entered, you discovered the slice was deceptive, for its lack of frontage was compensated by unconscionable depth, which

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made it ideal for its purpose. A counter turned the front into a shop, the rest of the long narrow interior served as the restaurant.

Iris led him through a labyrinth of back premises upstairs, into that part of the building where she and Rhoda lived. It was a small sitting-room to the rear, away from the noise of the traffic that thundered past the main road in the front. After the stir of the crowded tea-room downstairs, and the fierce clatter of the invisible kitchen he had passed, it was like a backwater of silence.

The furniture was low and comfortable, nothing matched or was new but everything harmonised, so that the room had a certain charm which disguised the awkwardness of its shape and any shabbiness. A home-made tea for two, obviously from the girdles and ovens of the Tea Shop below, was set out on a small table, and Iris lit the gas-jet under a kettle which it boiled conversationally on a series of pops and minor explosions.

'Should you be away from all that activity below?' he asked her. 'You know, I can wait until you shut down.'

'I know you can, but it's nice to get away from it for a little. It's lovely to see you, John.'

She was so happy that, as she poured out tea, she hummed to herself, her eyes bright with her thoughts. He had again the feeling she had once or twice given him in the past, a feeling of complete falseness. He realised that what rang untrue about her was her communication with him.

'And how are you getting on?' he asked, trying to bring her from her airy heights.

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'I couldn't be getting on better, John.' She smiled as she spoke, a secret smile, forgetting to put the patchwork cosy back on the teapot and sitting with her hands inside it on her lap.

'The Scots Tea Shop certainly seems a thriving concern,' he remarked. 'Does Rhoda own the building, or rent it?'

'I think own it—ninety-nine years' lease or something.'

'She'll be keeping it on once she's married, won't she?' he asked.

'Heavens, no,' she ejaculated. 'Not if she marries Bob Fordyce. He's positively rolling in wealth. Rhoda was always crazy about him—I remember when we were at school—'

She was interrupted by the entrance of Rhoda herself. No longer the over-grown, loosely jointed girl John recalled, he supposed she might still be called plain, but she had that niceness that some plain women possess.

'Hullo, John,' she greeted him. 'It's good to see you—after all these years. You've changed, of course—not like Iris. I see absolutely no change in her.' Her pleasure at seeing no change in Iris sweetened her face. 'But you were just a schoolboy when last I saw you. Do you remember the parties at your house?' These had been the days, before their father's illness, when the Garnetts had given parties. 'I always kept this about you—you remember, when you got the D.S.O.?'

She moved over to her small desk, opened a drawer and took out a newspaper cutting to show him. He saw himself looking back at himself from the fuzzy,

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cheap newspaper—God, to think he had once *felt* like that!

‘Rhoda keeps all these odds and ends,’ said Iris. ‘You’re a dear sentimental old thing,’ and she gave her a hug.

Now he knew why Iris had upset him earlier. It was seeing her sitting in another woman’s chair, fingering another woman’s china, as unthinkingly as though it were her own.

‘You’re engaged to Bob Fordyce?’ he asked Rhoda, trying to eliminate his sister. ‘I remember him at school—and Colin, of course. There was one in between them wasn’t there? William.’

‘Yes, John. He was killed in the war——’

‘Bob’s coming to-night,’ announced Iris. ‘Isn’t he, Rhoda?’ John felt she could not have been nicer to Rhoda if she tried, and she was trying very hard. ‘We’re having dinner downstairs in the Tea Shop now it’s closed, just the four of us. Bob was so keen to meet you. We’d better go down and see about their meal, hadn’t we, Rhoda?’

‘There are drinks over there,’ Rhoda told John. ‘Help yourself, and we’ll send Bob up whenever he comes.’

‘Yes, you’re a good excuse to get rid of him,’ laughed Iris. ‘He just loves hanging about the kitchen, doesn’t he, Rhoda? Until we put our foot down.’

The creaking stair betrayed the moment Bob Fordyce set foot on it. By the time he reached the top, John knew he was a heavy man.

All the Garnetts looked young for their years, so that their contemporaries, who had not worn so well, often startled them—those mothers of young children

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in Hillhead for instance, who had been in the same class as Iris, and whose hair was now beginning to grey. Bob Fordyce was so dark that his white hairs gave him a piebald look. Big and muscular, his heavy brows met in the middle and would have made the most rubicund face appear to frown; but with his heavy jowl they added a squareness to Bob's that was not unattractive.

'You're John Garnett,' he began. 'They say I was at school with you. Don't remember you from Adam.'

'I remember you because you happen to be Colin's big brother,' replied John.

Bob swung himself over to the corner where the drinks were.

'I'll do the honours of the house,' he said. 'I know all about them—I keep Rhoda supplied, so they're the best. What's yours?' He spoke rather thickly but John realised this was characteristic and not induced by what he took: Bob was too seasoned a cask for that. 'You're in a printing firm, aren't you?'

'Yes, Fraser & Milward, printers and stationery and all the rest.' He took the glass from him. 'What on earth do you do, to be able to roll in wealth in this year of income-tax and making-do?'

He could see the other liked that, and remembered that at school Bob had never been considered exactly bright except at games. It was as though Bob remembered that too, and felt now he had come into his own.

'I deal in stocks and shares.' He stretched out his legs before him as he sat in a low leather chair that obviously was used to his weight, for it had begun to sag.

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'What's called "in the City". Never knew what that meant.'

'I'll tell you what it means. Where another man gets a kick out of writing a book or climbing a mountain, I get a kick out of my stocks and shares. Do you know how I began? As I've gone on ever since, and I've never had a failure. I can't have a failure. You see, I only buy shares that are at rock-bottom, so low they can't fall any more. My first flutter was when I bought thousands, literally thousands, for sixpence a pound share—Gartnock Harbour Debentures. Within the month I'd sold the lot for six shillings each.'

'Fine and profitable,' said John, 'but all the Scot in me wouldn't give me a night's rest while I waited to see if my sixpenny share would ever take a turn for the better.'

'I'm as much a Scot as you, and I've never lost a night's sleep. You can't fail, man. The thing is to know when to sell—it's a hunch you acquire. Here's a tip from your Uncle Bob. If you've any interest in hotels, sell it now before the going gets any stickier. That's a market the bottom's falling out of. I must tell Colin I've seen you.'

'What's he doing?'

'Chartered accountant—married, with a nipper.'

'I remember Will better than I remember you,' said John, looking at him as though searching for the schoolboy he had once been. 'I'm sorry about him, Bob.' Will Fordyce would ever remain for him now, between classrooms, with brightness upon his brow.

'Yes,' said the other, glancing into his glass. 'It was submarinø with Will.'

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'I just don't understand how anyone could endure a submarine.'

'You were bad enough yourself—you were tanks, weren't you? Now I made up my mind I wouldn't go into the army—to be led over the top by an officer who knew as little what it was all about as I did. So I determined it was the navy for me, where every bit of the deck's measured off and you knew where you should be and what you should do if the worst happened. In I went to the navy. Within no time at all they had us all lined up, asking for volunteers for beach-parties—you know, the spearheads, the amphib., the ones who landed first—if they could get that length, who bore the brunt for the army *and* the navy. None of us were exactly falling over each other to volunteer, so they came along and picked out the ones they wanted. "You, my man," I was told, "so you want to volunteer, do you?" I was the only one who had the guts to say, "No, sir, I don't want to do anything of the kind." "What's that?" he said, passing on to the next and looking like all our school-masters rolled into one, "you don't think you'll make the grade? Of course you will. I tell you, it's men like you we're looking for!" And that's how I found myself landed in a landing-party.'

'It's funny, isn't it,' reflected John, 'it's all so far away now, yet it's such a part of us, like a background we can never escape from. I've a brother—he's ten years younger, so of course he wasn't in it. He and his pals might be another generation from me.'

'I know what you mean,' said Bob. 'It's a kind of hideous cement that binds our lot together.' He put down his glass, and paused before he rose to recharge

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it. 'If ever anyone has been through the mill of war,' he said, 'it's your sister.'

John was so startled by this proclamation that for a moment or two he was bereft of speech.

'Do you mean Iris?' he demanded over his shoulder, as Bob refilled their glasses. 'I never knew she was through anything except an air-raid or two—she was in the services but she wasn't even abroad.'

'No, I don't mean that. I mean the tragedy about her marriage. Latimer was in my class—I remember him all right.'

'What tragedy?' asked John.

And as though he had inadvertently tuned into it, he heard again his sister's voice say, 'Not if she marries Bob Fordyce.' *If* Rhoda married Bob, she had said. The realisation swept over John that Rhoda would not marry him if Iris could prevent it.

'Well, she gave up the man she really loved to marry a Pole, sacrificed everything, home and heart, for a man who had lost everything, and could give her nothing in return,' Bob was saying. 'And how much Iris had to give him, has to give any man—all that warmth.'

John took a long quaff from his glass, as though to season what he had just heard.

'Look,' he said, 'supposing your sister was engaged to one man and came home married to another, supposing she left your father to tell the Latimers she was now married to someone else—what would you feel? That she had sacrificed home and heart? I don't know about the navy, but I know the army has another name for it than that.'

For the first time he caught a glimpse of the boy he

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used to know as the other's heavily lidded eyes opened to stare at him.

'Why do you think she married the Pole, then?' he demanded.

'For the same reason that Iris will always do anything—because she wanted to. Stanislaus made beautiful love with a broken accent, Stanislaus kissed her hand. Nothing or no one would have stopped her from marrying him. Nothing or no one did.'

Again Bob looked into his glass, as though to find a solution there.

'Rhoda believes her,' he said lamely. 'She doesn't think it's an act.'

'I'm not surprised about Rhoda,' said John, 'but I am surprised about you. The dangerous thing about Iris is that she doesn't know she's putting on an act, or rather that before she's finished she's begun to believe it's the real thing.'

Silence gathered between them as they heard light steps quickening on the stairs outside.

'Everything under control!' said Iris, radiant as a Christmas tree with all its candles lit. 'Rhoda will be ready for us in five minutes.'

Bob made to prepare a drink for her, which he did without having to ask what she liked. John realised this was always the procedure when he came: Iris ran upstairs, while Rhoda remained below, putting the finishing touches to the meal. He felt Bob was noticing for the first time what had become a custom.

'What have you two been talking about?' Iris asked brightly.

'Business,' Bob assured her.

'Big business?' she enquired, looking up at him,

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aware how captivatingly diminutive she was beside his bulk.

'No,' he returned gamely, 'not big business at all—really quite small beer. I'll take Rhoda's drink down to her.'

'You can save yourself the trouble,' Iris advised him. 'Rhoda's always so unfestive—it means nothing to her.'

'It'll mean something to her if I take it,' he returned in a voice that John knew struck Iris as little short of fatuous.

He did not see his sister again until the night before his return to Glasgow, when she had dinner with him at the hotel where he was staying. He knew the moment he saw her cross the lounge towards him that she was going to be difficult. If, on the day of his arrival, she had found all the world in tune, playing up to her, now, no longer at concert pitch, her very personality appeared to jangle with discordance.

'What a day I've had,' she told him once they were seated in the dining-room. 'Everything has been at sixes and sevens. Rhoda has suddenly elected to put a date on her marriage, and can think of nothing else. That means every single thing has fallen on me. I simply don't know how I've got through it. John, this is going to be a godsend for Lennie.'

'What is?'

'The Scots Tea Shop of course. Once she's through her cookery course, she can join me here.'

'Don't let's bother about Lennie,' he replied. And he thought, sufficient unto the day is the Garnett

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thereof. 'I'm sure to positiveness that's the last thing she would choose—to come to London. Let's concentrate on you.'

'But she would be mad not to take advantage of a glorious opportunity like this.'

'The closer the relation, the madder they often strike one,' he remarked mildly, 'but remember that's something that is reciprocal. What's happening about the Tea Shop now Rhoda is marrying?'

'She'll sell it to me—bargain price.'

Thoughtfully he moved the cruets nearer her.

'And you want Lennie to pay for it with her trust money? She and Bruce didn't get what we did, remember.'

'She would have enough to buy the Tea Shop. I've told you Rhoda will let me have it as a bargain. Think of what we could make out of it between us.'

'Leave Lennie out of your plans, Iris.' He met her gaze across the table. 'I'm sorry—I can't buy it for you.'

'Not for me, John. You buy it, and let me run it. It would be in your name and would be well worth your while—like an investment for you.'

'I haven't got the money for investments of that nature,' he said, thinking of the hat-shop in Canada. 'Neither have you, Iris.'

'And what do you propose I should do?' As always, at the first breath of opposition she became fraught and inimical. 'Let the opportunity of a lifetime pass me by?' Her voice crackled with resentment.

'I'm afraid you'll have to, since you haven't got the money to pay for it.' He hated speaking to her like this, but all his business instincts warned him that Iris

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was incapable of holding anything down, because her professional energies would flag the moment her personal interest evaporated. 'Talk it over with Rhoda—she'll be sympathetic,' he advised, aware that everything he said was acting like a goad to her nerves and trying to prick as lightly as he could. 'She'll arrange to keep it on and let you run it for her. After all, you're living rent free in the house above the Tea Shop.'

But Iris was in no mood to have her blessings counted out for her.

'Rent free doesn't compensate for the drawbacks of living there,' she informed him, 'as you would soon discover if you attempted it. The kitchen is modern, but everything upstairs is positively archaic.'

'Still, Rhoda made it into a home,' he pointed out, 'and has lived there for years.'

'Yes, because it belonged and still belongs to Rhoda,' she retaliated. 'It makes all the difference, you would find, if a thing belongs to you. It's worth your while to make it your life's work if it belongs to you.'

He allowed her to have this parting shot and withheld any answering fire, lapsing into a brother-like silence she found nullifying. Her future loomed before her with an immediacy she found unbearable—run off her feet as she managed the Scots Tea Shop, and cut off from all masculine contact. In a ferment of conflicting emotions, her thoughts ran hither and thither, as though seeking escape, until her mind heaved like an ant-hill. Only when she heard him ask the waiter for the bill did she speak again.

'What *did* you and Bob Fordyce talk about the

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other night when Rhoda and I were getting the meal ready?' she enquired with an intentness that pinpointed every word.

'Oh, old times,' he replied casually, running his glance over the bill.

She sat for a moment or two after he had risen before she too rose. He had a curious picture of her face, purposeful for all its miniature keepsake loveliness, because in that moment he saw what was going to become of Iris.

He was suddenly reminded of a dead starfish on the sands at St. Andrews where they used to play as boy and girl, a starfish which moved after the tide had washed over it but that had no sensitivity of its own.

He sat in a corner-seat of the railway carriage next day, looking out of the blurred window. The scenery had none of the intimacy of the scenery through which he drove his car, and the hours took long to pass. For one thing the train hurtled at such a speed he had no time to take possession of what he saw, but might have been someone from another star rocketing through a world he was glad was not his own.

His mind, half dozing as though unhooked, became filled with unsatisfactory odds and ends that never achieved clarity or jumbled gloriously together into complete confusion. That dinner he had had when he had been south in the Braithwaites' semi-detached villa in Ealing, that pretentious, over-elaborate dinner when his hostess could hardly speak to him for nerves. He did not think he cared to be treated as though he were the boss, who had to be deferred to,

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kept sweet at all costs: it electrified him to find that others looked upon him in that light.

Iris when she entered the funny little sitting-room to tell them Rhoda would have dinner ready in five minutes, Iris sparkling and lit because hope rode high. And Iris last night when he had watched her coming towards him across the hotel lounge, bereft of her velocity. Not that he was too distressed at the difference between the two Irises. He knew one of a starfish's characteristics was to part with a limb when roughly handled, a dismemberment that was not so violent as it seemed, for it had the faculty of growing another one.

She of course felt with every instinct she possessed that her brother had somehow queered her pitch for her, because Rhoda, who had loved Bob Fordyce since she had been at school, was going to marry him after all. But had he? If John had not seen Bob the other night, another way would surely have manifested itself to open his eyes to what was happening.

Everything fitted in, fell into place, came about, if only it were given time. It was when you rushed at things, allowed yourself to become entangled with their works, that you failed to see the pattern. It was not so much a matter of adjusting yourself but finding what had been adjusted, what was as dependable as heaven itself. Lennie's words came back to him, 'It doesn't matter about the past, just as it doesn't matter about the future. It's now that counts. That's what living is.' And he found himself thinking of the word abide. The Scots bide meant to stay, to dwell, to be the better of. The 'a' before it somehow gave it a Biblical significance, where it meant to be, to stand

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firm. Anyway, it lodged itself in his mind as though it had roots. If you lived as you were meant to live, the present should be your abode where you stood firm for all time. Contentment began to fill him as he thought of his experience in Buchanan Street.

He looked out at the advertisements flashing from hoardings. Light rain flicked the window. Only in Highland stations did you see old-fashioned advertisements nowadays, the glassy tin on which they were emblazoned unweathered by the years. Someone's non-poisonous sheep-dip instead of home-perms, a clipper that advertised a Scots firm once famed for port, and stout, pig-pink sausages that had demurely invited you to buy them as the best, through war, rationing and restrictions.

He suddenly thought of having tea when he was small from Mrs. Irving's crinkled Japanese cups so stained with tannin inside that they looked mottled. He and Iris used to laugh to each other because the china was so fragile you saw your own fingers through it.

It had always been Iris and him in those days, when Bruce and Lennie had hardly been there at all. No matter how far apart they and their lives had naturally grown, nothing could ever unravel what had once been twined together. Indeed the longer the years that separated you from it, the more of a pull the twist of your childhood had upon you.

He had postponed making his will until he was married to Ailsa: now he was not going to marry her, he might as well make a will. His father had always been very careful about things like that. And he would leave Iris what he would have left Ailsa.

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He had caught the midday train north, so did not arrive until after nine. Glasgow struck him as grey and ponderous after the more brittle background of London. The spinning-top of life did not gyrate so dizzily here as there. He was glad he lived in Glasgow, it suited him better. As he turned the corner into Mountview Street, he smelt horses in the sudden squall of wind.

He climbed the stone stairs to their flat, feeling in his pocket for his keys. He did not even think of Ailsa as he passed the Craig door, so secure did he feel now that it would not open.

He saw that his own hall was unlit as he moved into the porch; before he could fit his key into the lock, someone within blurred through the opaque glass of the door as she approached to open it to him.

In the moment before he stepped inside, he had time to wonder whether it were Lennie or his mother, for the shadow he had seen looked like neither.

It was not Lennie, nor his mother. The person holding the door open for him was an unknown girl. But even as he thought that, he corrected himself instantly.

He closed the door behind him, leaning back against it, gazing at her as she gazed at him. They were no longer passing one another in a hotel corridor. They had come together in his own home.

Chapter Ten

THE dark hall suddenly floated into brightness as someone flashed on the electric light.

'Hullo, John. So you're back.' Lennie was standing behind him, looking curiously from him to the girl and from the girl to him. 'This is Flora Mure, John, and, Flora, you'll know by now this must be John, our brother!'

For a moment they were all linked together, Lennie, he and Flora Mure, as though each were a twig spanned by the same cobweb, its single thread intricately patterned in the whorl of its centre.

The living-room door squeaked as it always did when opened or shut because of the draught-board at the foot, and Bruce came into the hall. He did not lounge as usual and he sounded high-spirited, almost boisterous.

'That you, John? Mother said it was. You haven't brought Iris back with you, have you?'

His words might have been a wind that tore through a cobweb, making havoc of its delicate tracery. Lennie said laughingly, 'I hope there's something for you to eat!' and Flora followed her into the kitchen.

John heard himself say to Bruce, 'Tell mother I'll be through in a minute,' and went into their bedroom. He had to be by himself, if only for a moment. He felt the room round him with its exaggerated height of ceiling that made it appear smaller than it was. Light from the hall squeezed through the hinge-slits.

The knowledge that she shared the same house

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with him was like watching an oft-repeated story spring into life before his very eyes, witnessing reality itself shake from words so familiar they had long ago lost significance. Now he felt submerged by the wonder of it, had to accustom himself to the miracle of what was happening.

From the kitchen he heard her voice for the first time as she answered Bruce, a voice with a lilt to it that could never hold melancholy.

He went into the front room and greeted his mother. She asked him to turn on the light, but nobody troubled to pull the curtains, so that the brightly lit room seemed to swim into the encroaching darkness of the street below with something akin to wildness. As he answered his mother's questions, he heard the wind passing through the trees at the side window with the swish of a broom.

How uncommunicative the male members of the Garnett family were, his mother was thinking. John was his father all over again there, he never *told* you anything: now had it been Lennie who had been south and seen Iris, what a wealth of news she would have had to distribute when she came home.

'Flora came the day after you left,' she told him, speaking lightly that if anyone entered she could at once break off. 'Bruce has been like a different person. She seems to bring out all that is best in him. It would be perfect if something came of it. And after all, why shouldn't—'

Lennie came in, calling back to Flora to bring the brown sugar. John could not trust himself to look at her when she entered: he had the feeling that she too was taking desperate precautions not to look at him.

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Bruce brought in the coffee-pots, asking where he should put them.

'We've made sandwiches for you,' announced Lennie.

'Thousands of sandwiches,' said Flora.

'Although I told them British Railways would already have provided you with their nameless white fish coated with their pink sauce,' said Bruce. 'What more could man want?'

Her hair had that sheen of gold that has not a trace of red.

'I was saying to Flora,' said Lennie, 'that if you had known we were making sandwiches, you would have come in and eaten all the crusts as quickly as I could cut them off.'

'I took the edge off my appetite doing it for you,' said Bruce.

'Wonderful propensity your appetite has for growing edges,' remarked Lennie, 'after the dinner we watched you eat.'

She was dressed in a blue frock. All materials women wore were either wool or silk to John: he was right, her dress was a heavy silk, so plain that only a woman would know it was good.

'Everything to eat has gone up in price since you've been away,' Bruce informed him.

'Bruce has promised to pay at the door,' said Flora.

'But he never does,' countered Lennie.

'There are no trees in Ericht,' Bruce said to John. 'Flora thought our beech and ash out there were seaweed!'

She was Bruce's age, not his. He remembered

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telling Bob Fordyce that Bruce and his pals might belong to another generation. Yet he did not feel distant from her: a flower could spring from the same soil as a tree. But he might strike her as so much older. He was not tall, handsome, taking, as Bruce was when he chose. Because he was in love with her, she was seeing Bruce at his best. Their mother had noticed that. 'It would be perfect if something came of it.'

'Mrs. Grant trunk-called the day you left,' Bruce confided to him later when they were alone in their bedroom together, 'and got on to Lennie. It couldn't have fallen out better. Mrs. Mure had to be rushed to Glasgow much sooner than anyone expected. Of course Lennie said Flora must come here. I always knew she would. Say what anyone likes about one's family, they always do rally when it comes to the bit. Like a backbone.'

John suddenly became imbued with urgency to tell Bruce that he and Flora were not strangers, that he had met, at least seen her, when he had been north on his rounds, at the Caledonian Hotel, earlier that year. He raised himself on his elbow and began through the dark, 'Look, Bruce——'

'Of course Lennie took to Flora straight away, just as Flora took to Lennie,' said Bruce. 'I always knew they would. I can't tell you how glad I am you're home, John. I'm taking Flora to Roberto's to-morrow night. Can you lend me enough to pay for it—just until next pay-day?'

'Right,' agreed John. He sank back in bed: the opportunity to tell Bruce had passed.

'They don't think an operation will be necessary,'

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the younger brother was saying. 'About Mrs. Mure, I mean. They think she should respond to treatment all right, so Flora can leave her here with an easy mind.'

John wished he would stop babbling. He longed what Mrs. Boag would call to get on with his own thoughts.

'I saw Mrs. Mure,' continued Bruce, 'at the week-end—one of the times I took Flora to the nursing-home. She's so sweet, but Mrs. Grant's far more like Flora's mother if it goes by looks. Of course, Mr. Mure is Mrs. Grant's brother, and Flora says that when they were young they were both so alike they were often taken for twins. A wonderful thing happened, John, you'll never guess what. I know Mrs. Mure liked me.'

It was odd to hear Bruce humble.

'I'll go in and see her often once Flora's away—so that she won't miss her too much. Flora's leaving not to-morrow, or the next day, but the one after.' John counted out that was Friday as though it were an intricate sum. He knew Bruce put it thus to make it sound as far off as possible to himself. 'She can only travel on certain days, you see, because of the boats,' he was explaining. 'Heavens, you're not asleep already, are you?'

John did not reply. He lay in the dark, listening to the silence. Their room faced to the rear of the building, which, with other tenements, formed a square that enclosed back-greens and ash-bins, where spiky town cats roamed. Only when the wind was high could it be heard at the back. It was high to-night and filled the quadrangle with sound, like a trapped sea,

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but, neither ebbing nor flowing, this sound became part of the silence.

The University clock struck twelve. He listened to each chime, separate from the others, make a hollow for itself in the stillness.

Flora would be listening to it too. It would not be familiar to her as it was to them. Each chime would smite the air for her with the force of clangour, making her feel as though she were inside the clock.

Her room faced the side and she would hear the bump of a late motor car, steps ringing on stone pavements, the shunting of a distant train. Sounds that knelled, not wavered or thrilled.

What was she thinking as she lay awake in her city room? He could not, must not expect that she would be thinking of him. Certainly she had recognised him when she opened the door—as a man she had once passed in a hotel. But that was all. If she were thinking of anyone when she heard a clock boom twelve, the likeliest person would be Bruce.

‘Come and solve this mystery, John,’ Lennie greeted him when he entered the dining-room for breakfast next morning.

‘I nearly opened your letter for you,’ said Flora.

It was the first time she had spoken directly to him. He felt something tug between them, but even so he warned himself to beware, lest he confused his own feelings with her imagined response.

‘It’s a letter for you from Mrs. Grant,’ his mother said briskly. She was unaccustomed to sitting down

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to breakfast family-strong like this; usually they trickled in, in what their father had been wont to call penny numbers. "Sons of men, why will you scatter?" he used to quote in the days when the dinner-bell was rung.

'We want to know why Mrs. Grant should be writing to you,' announced Bruce. 'She doesn't know you; after all, it's me she knows. I'm sure she has put John when she meant Bruce.'

'He would have opened your letter if we hadn't stopped him,' warned Lennie.

'As though we would have let him do on purpose what I very nearly did by accident,' contributed Flora.

'Read the letter and make it snappy,' said Bruce. 'Can't you see we're all getting thinner waiting?'

Enjoyably John took as long as possible to open the good envelope and extract the letter, which he read with ejaculations of 'Ohs!' and 'Ahs!' and low whistles, as though it contained the most startling of news.

'What is it, John?' he heard his mother say from the other end of the table.

'Mrs. Grant has asked me to visit them when I am on my rounds this autumn,' he replied.

He was conscious of a stillness that came from his mother, as though she were pricked into attention, an impression he was to remember later with a sharpness he did not notice at the time.

'You're lucky,' said Bruce. Flora would be home at Ericht when John was north, so he could be handsome about his elder brother's luck.

'You'll wave to me, won't you?' he heard Bruce

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say hungrily to Flora before he set off for his office.

'Don't have him coming back up all these stairs just to discover you've forgotten,' said Lennie.

John left some time after Bruce. The reverberation when he shut the front door after him clattered down the stairs before him. He walked out of the close into the street, his footsteps hollowing.

He looked up at the top window, just as Bruce had done, and saw her standing behind the net curtains watching him. She did not wave to him, nor did he to her.

He received then from her a feeling of such youth that he knew it was perennial and had nothing to do with age. He seemed to have described full circle and linked up, through her, with himself when he used to stand there as a little boy watching the clouds blow past, in the days when he was closer to the heavens than he was to the stolid earth below. She was feeling now as he had felt then, only she was not looking up at the sky. Storey-high, she was looking down at him on the pavement below, as though her heaven were trysted where he was.

He checked his thoughts even as he thought them, as one who, catching sight of something unaccountable, dare not stir lest it disappear.

The house was dull that night when he returned for dinner. Only Lennie and their mother were in, for Bruce had taken Flora to Roberto's. His mother said in her even voice that he would be going to Rannick, and he replied that he had already written Mrs. Grant saying when he would go. It would not take him much out of his way. The long hours of the evening teased themselves out, as he wondered when

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Bruce would bring Flora home, when he could renew himself with the nearness of her presence.

He realised they were going to be so late that he might not even see her, and went to bed. The room was never quite dark because of the fanlight, when the outer door was still open and the light could thus filter in from the outside landing, patching the blackness with weak squares and oblongs.

He heard their steps on the stairs and the whole building seemed to shake as Bruce remembered to close the outer door. The patches, like envelopes, were immediately obliterated, but the room blazed when Bruce entered and snapped on the light.

'You're not asleep, are you?' he demanded. John could hear from his voice he was in an argumentative mood.

'Good thing I'm not,' he rejoined. 'Heavens, Bruce,' he expostulated as his brother, sitting frowning on his bed in his shirt sleeves, tugged off his shoes and dropped them on the floor, 'stop that racket—remember the Craigs below.'

'You can't breathe in this house without being told to remember the Craigs below,' grumbled Bruce. 'If ever I'm analysed, that's what the psychiatrist is going to discover wrapped inside my parcel of inhibitions—the Craigs below.'

'You could do with an inhibition or two,' remarked his brother. 'What went wrong?'

Bruce turned to glare at him.

'What went wrong when?' he demanded.

'To-night,' John said shortly.

'I don't know what you're getting at. Nothing went wrong.' He sighed suddenly, and his sigh hung

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long on the air so that it sounded like a whole series. 'But nothing went right either.'

'Didn't you get the table you wanted?'

'Yes, of course I did. I went in and saw Bernardo about all that beforehand. Our table. That bit was all right, but the whole evening seemed to fall to pieces. I've never felt like this with Flora before. I just couldn't get near her, come to a point, or anything.' He went towards the door. 'It was just as though she were in another room with someone else.' Inadvertently he set spinning from the dressing-table a wooden hair-brush which elected to crash on to that part of the floor uncovered by carpet or rug. 'Damn these Craigs!' he exploded as he slammed off the light.

The autumn gales had come early this year, staggering round the Garnetts' flat at its high corner as though it were a ship at sea. To Flora, in her side room, they sounded like horses' feet for ever stampeding past her window. They rumbled like a cart in the living-room chimney and puffed in those that were blocked in the bedrooms. The unused morning light filled the front rooms with a translucence that made them appear spare and extenuated. But Flora was more conscious of the tall walls of this house than the spent light they imprisoned. Unaccustomed to living at such height, the solidity of the building gave her a curious feeling, as though she were at the top of a tree growing upside down, whose roots were in the air. Light from outside dyed and stained the walls, reached the too high ceilings only to mottle them,

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and penetrated the hall in wedges and cracks.

'This is my favourite kind of day,' thought John, looking down into the street and watching the first russet leaves stripped from the trees blow in the wind. But he knew even if fog had been banked to the very windows it would still have been his favourite kind of day.

'This is my favourite kind of day,' thought Flora, 'and I love this house,' but she knew it was the same house that but a few days ago had struck her as gaunt and intimidating.

His mother noticed that Bruce was rather silent at breakfast, or rather he had reverted to his uncommunicative moods before Flora came—Bruce was seldom at his best in the morning. She came to the conclusion that his silence now was induced by the thought that their visitor was leaving on the morrow.

Breakfast to-day indeed was very like a Garnett breakfast any day, with Lennie, her elbows on the table, sipping her tea deep in her own thoughts, and John—he of course was always the quietest of all, without Bruce's ups and downs. But Flora did not appear in the least put out by this surfeit of silence as she sat, her honey-coloured lashes fanning her cheeks, as though she were tuned-in to it.

Mrs. Garnett did not hear Bruce ask her to wave to him, and had to remind her. But perhaps remind was the wrong word, Flora might have been waiting for him to ask her—these bitter-sweet moments, which had the stretch of eternity, when the heart trembled between breaking and dancing.

'You've been so good to me, Mrs. Garnett,' she said when she returned to the dining-room and began

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to help her clear the table. Lennie sang out to them she was away. 'I'll never forget it. None of us will.'

The mother knew it was not her goodness to her that Flora would never forget.

'You've been so easy a guest you're not like a guest at all,' she returned. 'You are like one of us.' The front door banged. 'That will be John away,' she remarked.

'Yes,' said Flora, 'that's John away. Have you always lived here, Mrs. Garnett, at the top of the house like this?'

'Ever since I married. All the children were born here, even Iris and John. There's Mrs. Boag.' They heard the daily help moving about the house as though she had taken possession of it. 'People said it would be difficult having children, living up so many flights of stairs, but I never found it so.' It was not because she had been young that she had not found it difficult; after all, and her thoughts were bleak, she had not been a particularly young woman when Bruce and Lennie were born. 'Everything has its compensations—we have always felt by ourselves, away from people, up here.' Flora followed her into the kitchen. 'It is kind of your Aunt Flora asking John to Rannick,' she remarked, turning on the tap. She knew Mrs. Boag had already used it because she always screwed it off so tightly. 'She asked him after their father died, but he let Bruce go instead of him, because he thought Bruce needed it more than he.'

'Did he, Mrs. Garnett?' Flora was looking at the cup she was drying with as much interest as though the pattern were appearing as she gazed at it.

'That was when he met you, of course.'

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'How? Oh, you mean Bruce? Yes, of course it would be.'

'You are very like your Aunt Flora,' commented Mrs. Garnett. 'Very like your Aunt Flora was when I saw her. At her wedding—my husband was Niall Grant's best man.' Because, at the last minute, the best man had been unable to officiate and John Garnett had been called upon to fill his place. 'I don't expect she will have changed much—fair women always wear so well.' She looked into the girl's face and suddenly felt marooned by herself in her own generation. Of course Aunt Flora would not have changed to her niece—she would be as she had always remembered her, her favourite aunt.

'When will they all be back?' asked Flora.

'Bruce will be back as soon after five o'clock as Bruce can manage,' his mother told her.

'And John?'

She was obviously only asking about John to hide her eagerness about Bruce.

'John's more of a movable feast—he hasn't set hours like Bruce. When are you going to the nursing-home, dear?'

'They asked me to come in the morning. I'll walk through the park. I know my way beautifully now—no one need come with me.'

She could not have borne to be accompanied. She was living for the time when she would be by herself and able to drown herself in dreams of John Garnett. Only thus could she exist until she saw him this evening. The quickened face of the man she had passed in the hotel—what she had felt when she opened the door to him the night before last. Her

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emotions had reached to the very deeps of her being, disturbing what she had not known she possessed. She felt she knew everything there was to know about the man she loved, as though they were already one. Until she saw him to-night, she would fill as much of the intervening time as she could thinking of him, as she walked through a park fantastic with trees that grew like giant ferns.

John determined to take the tram, not the bus, to the mills at Dornadill. Dornadill was a terminus for the trams, an endless dreich journey which he would never have undertaken on an ordinary day, when you sat so long in the car that you forgot about yourself. But to-day was not ordinary. He could only live through to-day, until he saw her again, if he were able to spend as much of it as possible allowing her to fill his thoughts. When he had to speak to people, give his attention elsewhere, it was as though he were forcibly parted from her.

He waited at a tram stop in the centre of the city. The Dornadill cars passed through a low quarter and their passengers were often rough, not like those who travelled west or to the southern suburbs. The typical Glaswegian—he travelled on any and every tram. So many different strains had passed through him, yet he had modulated them all into someone who was completely indigenous, with a speech, a view-point, a kind of outraged sensibility all his own. By now John could tell, wherever he found him, whatever he wore, if he were a Glasgow man, born and bred.

That big fellow over there was decidedly not. Cer-

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tainly bigness was not a characteristic of the Glaswegian. Generations of city life had long ago cramped the giants of Highlanders, who had come from their islands and glens, into more meagre frames. But it was not because he was particularly untypical of Glasgow that John found himself staring at the big fellow over there. He had seen that large, flattened, featureless face before—bending over him in the hospital out east. It was Dr. Maiben.

He pushed through the press of people struggling on and off the tram-car.

‘Hullo, Dr. Maiben,’ he said. ‘Do you remember me?’

The man looked at him through his rimless glasses. He was young, and his big, pallid, baby’s face sealed his youth now as it would in the years to come when he had outgrown it. John saw him staring at him as though unable to believe his eyes.

‘Not you—Garnett,’ he said, and his voice sounded winded. ‘Good God, you were a person I never expected to see again.’

Chapter Eleven

'**W**AS I as ill as all that?' John said, and his own voice reached him as thinned on the way.

'Good heavens, no. You had a fracture—that was all.' The over-heartiness struck falsely on John's ears.

'That was what they told me at the clearing-station. Not to worry. That I would be back into it all again before I knew where I was.' He was smiling faintly at him, as though to betray the other into thinking it was a smiling matter. 'You doctors out there always seemed to think that was what we lived for—to be back into it all again as soon as possible!'

'Not a hospital staff. A clearing-station's different—just what its name implies. Those days seem long ago, don't they? See anything of the old crowd?'

That big, flattened, featureless face with the embedded blankness of a toe-nail—how John hated it.

'My old crowd won't be your old crowd,' he replied, feeling for his cigarettes but still keeping his eye on the other, as though he were not going to allow him to elude him thus easily. 'You saw us as we passed through. And out of all those hundreds of wounded, you remembered I had a fracture and that my name was Garnett.'

'That's an easy one,' said Dr. Maiben, his face, round as a moon, shifty with smiling back at him. 'I remember you because you told me you were from Glasgow, and I told you my people had just gone there to live. Remember!'

'As you say, those days seem long ago,' John said mechanically. 'And do you like living in Glasgow?'

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Just up to visit your people? Where have you landed, then? A hospital appointment—radiologist? Has that always been your line? Well, that must be a heap sight better than general practice these N.H.S. days. Nice to have seen you.'

He moved away from the tram stop. He would take a bus to Dornadill after all. He sat on the top, his body jolting with its movement. No point in letting his imagination run away with him, no point at all. Naturally the doctor had been surprised to see him, in a dirty Glasgow street, when the last time they had met had been in a surgically clean hospital ward out east. Only—John had noticed, towards the end of their conversation, that the big lens of the man's glasses facing him were blurred as with steam.

Why had the great baboon told him that radiology was his line? He might have seen John's X-ray plates at the hospital and they might have revealed that his case was not so straightforward after all. Now he came to think of it, there had never been any talk of his going back into it all again once he was in hospital—there it had been taken for granted that he was out of it for good. He cracked his fingers against the bus window.

He felt all right, it was years since he had been to Dr. Lauder, their family doctor, not indeed since he had returned home from the army. Dr. Lauder then was bound to know everything there was to know about him as a case. He had been told he should have a check-up every now and then, but they told everyone that, and no one of course ever bothered about it. Like going to the dentist—you were supposed to go

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at least once a year, and you only went when a tooth began to give you gyp.

He was all right, and had been all along. Not one symptom could he produce to show that anything was wrong.

Had it not become a habit with him to save himself? His car for instance—he never used it, except for his rounds. Not like Tom Ritchie. But then Tom lived in a villa at Newtonmearns, with his own garage at his back door. It was easier for him to drive in and out of town than to take tram or bus, Newtonmearns was a sight further out than the west end. Just as it was quicker for John to use public transport than to walk down the hill to the garage in Byres Road. That was all there was to that.

The bus conductress, chewing gum, said to him, 'Here, if you're sitting on, you'll have to pay for another fare,' and he saw they had arrived at Dornadill town hall. He bit back the reply, 'Your second name is charm.' As he bumped his way downstairs, he found himself thinking, If she remembered me as a passenger who paid only as far as Dornadill, why shouldn't Dr. Maiben remember me as a patient when the association of Glasgow singled me out?

He walked down the main street, cut through a loan and made towards the mills across waste land. It was then he remembered some words, 'My advice to you would be lean back—lean back hard, if you don't want to find yourself grounded.' Unconsciously his haste slackened.

For a moment or two the words hung voiceless in his memory until he succeeded in tracing them to Dr. Gentles—the day he had called on them after

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their father's death, when he spoke to Bruce about the following wind.

Dr. Gentles had told Bruce when something happened to lean back hard. John must lean back now. That, he supposed, was what faith was. What was wrong with him and his generation was they had no faith, they did everything in their own strength. But to a minister faith was not a leap in the dark, it was being helped across. To a man like Dr. Gentles there was no dark. The exultation of the experience John had himself had proved to him at first hand that Dr. Gentles was right.

After doing his business at the mills, he had lunch in the canteen. That would fill up the time until two o'clock, when Dr. Lauder consulted. He heard the cheerful clatter of the canteen as though removed from it, as he allowed his thoughts to dwell on Flora. A life-time was not long enough in which to love her. Everything would depend on his taking the doctor by surprise. If he watched him closely, he should know the truth at once from his timing alone, whatever he chose to say.

He sat in the waiting-room, opening a *Punch* to push it aside and take up a *Post*. Dr. Lauder's father had been a well-known Glasgow doctor before him, this had been his house, his collection of pictures of the Glasgow School still hung on the walls exactly as they had in his day. They had not struck him as hung too high as they struck modern eyes.

These paintings of children amongst flowery grasses, dappled by a long ago summer, had a nostalgic charm; girls with long hair, before the bobbed era, his mother's period. How good to feel the sun on

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your face like that. It seemed long ago since he could remember it stroking him like a benediction, all the more blessed because it was taken for granted—

‘Hullo, John, you’re a stranger. You certainly don’t put much in my way!’

Dr. Lauder was spare and greyly dyspeptic, with the sedentary look of a professor. Everything about him seemed to droop with fatigue, the lids of his eyes, his thick, white eyebrows, and thin shoulders.

‘No, I don’t, do I?’ smiled John, sitting in the patient’s chair at his desk in the consulting-room. The smile wiped from his face. ‘Dr. Lauder,’ he said sharply, ‘I want to know—what’s wrong with me?’

Dr. Lauder no longer looked tired as he gazed fully back at his patient with eyes that seemed curiously fine, as though their drooping lids acted as shields to preserve them. Not for one second did John see him hesitate.

‘Wrong with you?’ he demanded. ‘What do you mean, wrong with you?’

‘I mean, what was wrong with me when I came back from the army?’

‘Fracture of the pelvis. Why?’

He was not trying to stall him off, or to mark time. John relaxed where he sat, but he continued to watch the other warily.

‘That all?’ he enquired.

‘That was all. There are some who would think it was plenty.’

‘Was it a bad fracture? I thought it healed all right.’

‘You’re like those people who talk about good art. As no art can be bad, so no fracture can be good.’

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Yours was a clean break, if that's what you mean. It couldn't have united better.'

John blew out his breath with relief.

'Why all these questions at this date?' asked the other.

'I met one of the doctors who had seen me in the hospital out there,' John explained, 'this morning, by accident, in Argyle Street. And from something he said, or perhaps it was his surprise at seeing me, I received the impression that I gave him quite a shock, that he expected I was under the daisies long ago. It must have been my imagination.'

'Must have been. Surely it was surprising enough to meet you after all these years, in the salubrious haunts of Argyle Street of all places, without you jumping to conclusions.'

'Surely. But I did. I tell you I got the wind up properly.' He moved a framed photograph on the doctor's desk without thinking what he was doing, although he noticed it was a silver, not a leather frame—everything in this house belonged to that period before two wars. 'I began to imagine all sorts of things. For instance--well, my boss is retiring at the end of this year, which means that I'll take over from him. And I'm quite sorry he's going. I like the *status quo*, things as they are. I feel I've plenty on my plate already with which to cope without taking on new commitments. Well, these aren't characteristics of a man of my age, are they?'

'Good God, John, have you forgotten that men of your age have come through a war? Where will you find the survivors of the Few? Those I know of the old Glasgow squadron have all found work in the

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country. That's your generation—accept it. I missed your father's war because I had a weak stomach. Now I belong to an army that's millions strong, and every day recruits are added to its ranks—those who have peptic or duodenal ulcers. I know from experience what to eat and what to avoid. You know to let the other fellow lift the heavy weight. That's all there is to it.'

Autumn sunshine sprinkled through the thinning leaves of the trees as John walked down the terrace where Dr. Lauder lived. Although it was too weak to heat, he felt it as good on his face as if it had the strength of summer. Each single leaf gummed to the pavement had an island of damp round it: they caparisoned the grey ground as bright as heraldry.

He walked up Mountview Street, hearing behind him the singing of a tram-car as it swung along the road he had just crossed. He did not hurry, for he knew there was no need for haste. As he approached their corner flat, he looked up at the oriel windows and saw Flora watching for him, as he knew she would be. Just as he knew she was alone in the house.

She did not look round when he entered the room. He went and stood behind her, where she gazed out at the parapets and citadels of clouds and listened to ships' horns sounding from the Clyde.

She would not see what he saw when he looked across at the street, its many windows catching the light until the buildings glanced like glass houses, their top panes reflecting the passing clouds so that they flowed with the movement of water.

What she saw would be static as stone. One row of

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houses facing another row like its own reflection, standing in each other's shadow. That was what she would see when she looked across at the street.

'How you must hate the town after your island,' he said, hearing the words jerk from him as though he were unused to speaking. 'It must strike you as drab and grey, with its gutters and sooty chimney-stalks, and gardens you would not call gardens.'

She turned to look at him then.

'No,' she said, 'it doesn't strike me as drab and grey. I love it, every stone of it, because it is your home.'

They moved imperceptibly towards each other, as if drawn, until she was in his arms. There was wildness in the ecstasy of that first kiss, as though to bridge all the years that had brought them to this moment.

'Mrs. Garnett left just before you came,' she said. 'She's having tea in town with your Aunt Dorothy.' She knew she was not really the Garnetts' aunt, that she had been their mother's bridesmaid: Lennie and Bruce had told her everything like that. 'She wanted me to join them, but I waited for you. I knew you would come home.'

He read in her face the wonder she saw on his. And as he looked at her and heard her voice in the familiar, taken for granted room, a curious feeling took possession of him. Not of unreality because this was reality, the stuff of which he had expected life to be when he was Bruce's age. But because the reality transcended even his one-time belief in it, he felt his home would never strike him as ordinary again, never

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again would he take it for granted. The familiar had become imbued for him with all the rarity of the unfamiliar. She saw his face livened as he gazed at her, heard his words tripping over each other in their excitement.

'I know what we'll do, I'll take you to a little village near Edinburgh, where we can have dinner. It's a dream of a place, and we'll come back late—as late as we can.' Because to-morrow she would have to leave and they would be parted.

He scribbled a note, 'Have taken Flora out—don't expect us home till late,' which he left on the kitchen table. Flora placed the fish-slice pointing to it that it would not be overlooked. She ran out of the house with him, and they went down the hill to the garage for his car, walking close together. She wore over her blue dress a pale biscuit coat, what he would have described as oatmeal, with a yoke like a deep shawl collar, and no hat. She never wore a hat unless she had to—he knew those things about her not as though he had been told but as though they had been brought up together.

Happiness span between them as they sat side by side in the car. Each moment they were together was so full to brimming over, they felt they could never move out of the halo it threw.

'That's why I love East Lothian,' he told her when they had driven through Edinburgh into a landscape wanly gold, shorn of its harvest. 'The scale's correct here—seven-eighths sky, one-eighth earth. This is countryside that gathers you to it.'

'At home,' she said, 'it's all sea and sky. Oh, John, when will you come to Ericht?'

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'I could come towards the end of the month, after my rounds. I can take my holiday then—fate must have known and saved it up for this.'

'I'll be on the jetty watching for you,' she promised. 'What it will mean to show you everything. Every rock on the shore has its own rockery, with a shell sticking to it, and a tuft of grass or a tussock of heather, a patch of grey moss or a sea-pink growing from it. John, you'll go to see mother and tell her about us, won't you?'

'Yes, I was remembering that—I'll go to-morrow.' They both thought of Bruce. 'I'll tell Bruce to-night,' he said heavily, 'when we get home.'

'Even if I hadn't met you,' she said, speaking with some reluctance, 'I want you to know—I would never have loved Bruce.'

Something tightened between them.

'Tell me about your island,' he said. 'What does Ericht mean?'

'It's a name suggestive of brightness. You see, there's nothing to darken it, hardly what you would call a hill to throw a shadow. The sky is transparent as a shell, which means that even darkness has its own luminosity. The Atlantic breakers crashing on the shore have the whole world to thunder in. Father bought it for our holidays, but he loves it so much that he scarcely ever leaves it. There's nothing fretful about it, nothing of a timetable about its year—the nearest we get to that is when the boat comes in. Wood is scarce there and what we have has been washed up by the sea. All the wood in our house is blanched white. The fishermen and crofters' cottages are low because of the wind and built as a lighthouse

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is built, the more the wind pulls the tighter each draws. The wind harps through the bents and even the few dumpy little hay-stacks have to be tethered.' Her head turned to read the name like a nursery-rhyme on a sign-post. 'John,' she asked, 'are you sure this isn't your dream of a place?'

'Quite sure,' he told her confidently. 'You were awake when you saw that, but you really are over the border when you arrive where I'm taking you. This countryside's so different from the countryside round Drumban. That's a village near Glasgow.'

'I know,' she said; 'Bruce and Lennie have told me about Drumban.'

'Drumban's dour Covenanting country. There you feel moorland's never far away, that if the ground were left to itself the moor would claim it as its own. But here you feel the soil has been tilled and mown and pastured for so long that it has shaken every grain of peat hag or particle of marshland from its roots. The cottages at Drumban are squat and serviceable, as they have been all along. The old graveyard houses hammermen and weavers, dykers and wrights. But the village I'm taking you to is as pretty as anything you'll find in England.'

She was to remember it for all time as she saw it then, with its ageless trees, the ruin of a castle on the green hump of a hill and cottage gardens ablaze with autumn flowers, ringing it into a whole. So that when she thought of it in the years to come, its air was always full of dandelion clocks and leaves transparent when they caught the light. As John drew up his car, they heard the croodling of wood pigeons, the flocking cry of seagulls and the hoarse cawing of rooks.

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He went into the hotel to book a table for dinner. As she waited for him, Flora noticed that the light on the mossy turf of the village green gave it the sheen of silk and the depth of velvet. It was early yet, and they had time to walk to the sea. They took a path that led through farmlands and a wood. The wind scraped like a comb through a field, blowing the grasses blue as forget-me-nots.

Their hair blew back from their brows as, hand in hand, they made for the shore. Excitement mounted in John as it had when he was a child in that first wild breathless rush to the sea, as though he had been afraid it would not wait for him. But no childish apprehension sharpened this moment. All life lay waiting for them.

They had the shore to themselves, calling to each other that they might hear the other's voice, parting for the happiness of coming together. The wave-rippled sand glistened like a seal's back in the fading light, and each rock threw a steeple shadow. The furrowed sky was that pigeon grey which pearls into silver at a glance; while the sea, scarcely rocking with the tide, slanted in the after-shine of the sun, and was cold with the promise of the moon. So that for that short space between day and night, sea and sky might have changed places.

They left only when the lighthouse on its island shot its beam across the water. The wood they passed through on their way back was full of little rustles, scurries and secretive tapping sounds. When they reached the village it was to find its windows lit and their car, which had had the place to itself when they left, now one of many outside the hotel.

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It was not a hotel, a road-house or a restaurant, but combined the best of all three. A long, low building, its cottage rooms leading into each other had been transformed into small lounges, each with its enormous log-fire, and all leading to the dining-room.

An incredible full moon swung golden as corn into the sky. Sweet country smells came through the small windows, one round as a port-hole, framing the same picture of the unchanging village they had always framed. John and Flora saw through theirs the castle dovecot. The shape of an enormous old-fashioned beehive, with many doors and none at ground level, it was not in ruins but had a tuft of grass sprouting from it that looked in the distance like a bird for ever alight on its domed top.

A lit bottle of ruby red wine had ivy trailing over it for decoration. The concealed lighting was subdued, and the setting so intimate that each felt it had been prepared for them and them alone. This was not having dinner in a restaurant, this was enchantment.

It was late when they walked up the hill together to Mountview Street and no lights were shining in the top corner flat. John kissed her for the last time that night on the landing before they entered the house. When he shut the outer door behind them it clanged, as though it were shutting out the present, palpitating with life, and shutting him in with a piece of the unfinished past. Again he smelt that smell of airless stone that clung to their porch and which took his thoughts back to his school-days.

He saw, from the lit fanlight above their room, where Bruce was. He pushed open the door and

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entered. His brother was not in bed but, fully clothed, wheeled round to front him, his face darkling with anger.

'What do you think you're playing at?' he demanded before the other could speak.

'Look, Bruce,' said John, knocking the door close behind him with his shoulder, 'I know this is going to be a shock for you. But I love Flora, and Flora loves me.'

Chapter Twelve

JOHN could see Bruce reel as though he had received a physical blow.

'You—' he began. The elder brother supposed he had picked up the language he now used when he was on national service. The words on Bruce's lips were like blasphemies. He finished up with 'double crosser', which, instead of sounding innocuous after what had gone before it, stood out with a force all its own.

John began to undress, taking off his jacket and beginning to undo his tie.

'I don't believe it,' said Bruce, watching him. 'I don't believe you.'

'You'll have to believe it,' replied John, 'because it's true. I'm sorry because of you, Bruce, but it's just one of those things that happen because it can't help happening.'

'That's a lie, that's the blackest lie of all. Can't help happening! When you go off with the girl you know I love the moment my back's turned, and come home to tell me you're in love with her.'

He was concentrating on John's love for Flora because he had not braced himself yet to deal with Flora's for John.

'It didn't happen quite as suddenly as you think, Bruce,' said John, winding his tie in a preoccupied way round the wooden bar of a chair instead of hanging it as usual over the mirror. 'You see, this isn't the first time Flora and I have met.'

'Where? When? Why didn't you tell me? You

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knew I loved her. Of all the——'

'In late spring—when I was on my rounds,' interrupted John before the other could get under way. 'In the Caledonian Hotel.' He now had the greatest reluctance to tell Bruce about it, as though he felt his brother had the power to destroy something he had thought imperishable.

'Well, and what happened—in the Caledonian Hotel? To think you met Flora there, and have kept it dark all this time, never told me.'

'I didn't know it was Flora,' said John, 'and she didn't know it was me. She could scarcely have known then that such a person as I existed.'

'Yes, but what happened? How did you come together?'

'We didn't. There was a big dance at the hotel and she was a guest. We passed one another in the corridor, but I'll always remember her—as she has always remembered me.'

'And that's all that happened?' Bruce's breath caught. 'You just passed her in a hotel corridor,' he mimicked. 'Do you think I'll believe that blah-blah?'

'Nobody's asking you to—you'll have to believe or disbelieve what you like.'

'You fell in love with her at sight according to your story, found out who she was, and never told me.'

'I couldn't tell you when I couldn't find out who she was. All I could discover was the name of the person who was giving the dance. That was why it was so extraordinary when I came home on Tuesday night and Flora opened the door to me. I felt as though I were between two worlds.'

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'And still you didn't tell me.'

'I tried to, the night I came home, but you were so full of everything I couldn't get it in.'

'I'll tell you why you couldn't get it in. There was nothing to get in. But your plans were laid. You listened to me telling you everything about Flora and me, drank it all in, while you arranged how you could upset my apple-cart, do me down, cut me out.'

'Look, Bruce, you told me yourself when you came back from Roberto's that the evening had been a fizzle-out——'

'Yes, you saw to that. I would be engaged to Flora by now if it hadn't been for you.'

'How could I see to it when I didn't see Flora alone until this afternoon?'

• 'This afternoon!' chattered Bruce, beside himself. 'This afternoon—so you came home in the afternoon? Well, what were you doing, doing that, if it wasn't to get in with her before I could? You arranged it all. She changed towards me the moment you came back. Why had you to come back? Why couldn't you stay where you were? The long and the short of it is that you've stolen her from me.'

'Don't be an ass, Bruce,' said John, losing patience. 'I—no one could steal Flora from you. She's not deaf or dumb, is she?'

'You've worked on her. You're years older than she is. She's flattered—that's what she is, although God knows what she has to be flattered about where you're concerned. That's all there is to it.'

'Snap out of it, Bruce,' said John.

'Don't you come the elder brother over me.'

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'You'll have to face it. Flora cares for me, and not for you. That's the long and the short of it.'

Bruce stood, intent with stillness, and there was something more dangerous in this compacted quiescence than when he was trembling with anger. At that moment John knew he was capable of murdering him.

'Switch off the light, will you?' he said in an effort to break the tension between them.

'I'll do nothing of the kind,' returned Bruce, the words shuddering from him with enough momentum to shake his whole being. 'Switch off your own light. And if you think you're going to switch off the conversation as you'd switch off an electric light, now you want to, now you've done all the harm, you're mistaken. As you'll discover before you're very much older.' When John did not reply, he leant over his bed and shouted at him until everyone in the house must have heard at least his voice, 'Did you tell her about the dame downstairs? That she threw you over after she had been engaged to you for years because she couldn't bear the sight of you?'

'That's who you should have married,' he continued a little later, with as much energy as though he were being argued with. 'Why couldn't you stick to your own set? You and Ailsa Craig are of an age, the same spinster-bachelor set-up, what's called suitable. Oh God,' he groaned between his teeth, 'why did she throw you over? Why did she have to find out before she married you that she couldn't stick you?'

It was the same throughout the night. John was wakened repeatedly by his voice, rough and discordant, challenging him with a storm of words. He did

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think of rising himself to switch off the light but it did not seem worth the effort, when Bruce would know from his action he was awake and so redouble his onslaughts.

Bruce did not know where to turn. If he lay on his back he had to look up at the grimy cracks forking above him on the ceiling. If he lay on his right side, he had to see his hated brother; if on his left, the curtains banking back the gloom of inevitable dawn.

He lay, black with hatred, hating everything. Life strung before him meaningless, purposeless, dead. Everything in the room ached with staleness. There was no such thing as time before him, there was only tedium. He wondered how he was going to endure living from day to day. Hell was not being racked with torment, it was not madness; hell was being stretched out as far as you could go with ennui, caught sickeningly on a wave that never broke, tied to a level viewless road that went neither up nor down, in or out.

Flora! She was the sun in his sky, the pivot of his existence. Without her he was nothing, cared for nothing, had no heritage. His passion for her was so deep it was bound to call forth a response. She knew he was in love with her when they met at Rannick House. There had been nothing separating them then, as there had been nothing separating them when she had arrived, but a few short days ago, at Mount-view Street.

Roberto's had been the first indication he had received that she was no longer in tune with him, although he had not dreamed then what had happened. That John had come between them.

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What Bruce must do was show Flora, prove to her, how John had betrayed him. As he had dreaded the day he would have to face, now he longed for it to come that he might put right what John had distorted.

He heard a cat outside crying like a child. It was the only sound there was in a silence as heavy as a mausoleum. Surely it must be near morning now. Flora was bound to be up early because she was leaving to-day. Already he had ordered a car to take her to Queen Street station where he would see her off on the train for Fort William. He, not John, would still be seeing her off—if only morning would come.

He heard a message-boy clattering up the stairs, and the refuse men rattling ash-bin lids as they called to each other. He went into the bathroom, snapped up the blind and saw through the window the grey morning street scoured bare of shadows. His eyes hurt, as though with the natural light.

Outside a milk-boy was trundling his bottles in a hand-cart which set up a tintinnabulation as its contents rattled. He washed and shaved: he would hardly have recognised himself in the mirror—to think one night could do that to him.

Where could he wait in this trap of a house until he was certain Flora would be up? There was not one room in which he would be safe either from his mother or Lennie. He returned to his bedroom to find John had switched off the light. Bruce went to the curtains and tore them apart. He finished dressing, then went into the sitting-room.

He did not speak when Lennie entered, nor did she speak to him. Lennie was in the conspiracy against

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him. Having pulled a string or two at the office yesterday since it was Flora's last night, he had been the one to find John's note. Surely it could not be yesterday—a dreetling life-time separated him from the man who had found John's note. When he had exploded to his sister and mother, expecting them in his outrage to be as appalled as he, Lennie had said to him, 'But, Bruce, has Flora given you any sign that she cares for you?'

He crossed the hall, tapped on Flora's door and entered.

The spare-room was the most forbidding room in the house. Although their mother had used it during their father's illness, it had now reverted to its habitual chill of desuetude, and Iris's tenure had been too short to make any difference to it. Everything no one wanted but that had to be kept was put in there, so that the family thought of it more as a storeroom than anything else. It was where Lennie kept her pyramid of hat-boxes. In winter its unheated atmosphere was like a slap in the face: in summer the tree outside its narrow window darkened the interior.

His happiness that Flora was staying with them had compensated for Bruce feeling ashamed of the room in which she had to stay. He did not know she was so fond of it by now that she hated leaving it, lying in bed in the morning, before the heavy curtains were drawn back, and watching the shadows of the tree outside draping the walls. He did know that now when he saw her standing in it, as he had seen her on the evening of her arrival, all he had eyes for was her.

She had finished her packing and was locking her

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suit-case when he entered. She looked over her shoulder to see who it was, then turned to face him. She was almost as tall as he, and the set of her head always reminded him of a song Lennie sang about the house, 'How beautiful they are, the lordly ones. . . .'

She must love him as he loved her. Her nearness hurt him to such an extent that he felt the only way he could assuage his hurt was to sweep her into his arms and devour her with his passion. Instead he heard the trite flat words fall from his lips:

'What's all this?'

'You mean, Bruce,' she said clearly, 'that John has told you I love him.'

'You can't,' he said hoarsely. 'You don't understand. John has no right to do what he has done. He has known all along what I felt for you. I told him when I came back from Rannick that you were the only person I could ever care for.'

'Look, Bruce,' she said. Already she had caught John's habit of saying 'Look'—Bruce felt he could have forgiven them both anything but that. 'This has nothing to do with rights. It has really very little to do with either you or John. It has to do with me and me alone. I love John.'

He thought his heart would crack hearing her say of his brother what he had longed to hear her say of himself.

'You didn't see anything wrong with me before he came on the scene,' he said, hating to hear himself sound sullen.

'I don't see anything wrong with you now that he has come on the scene,' she returned. 'I feel exactly the same towards you as I've always felt.'

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'That's a lie.' The words blazed from him, words he could prove. 'You were different at Roberto's for the first time—all because he had come home. You might as well not have been sitting beside me.'

'Even if John hadn't come home, I would still not have let you propose to me at Roberto's. Or if you had, I would have said no.'

He was looking at her damagingly through narrowed eyes.

'I don't believe you,' he said.

'Don't you, Bruce? Have you forgotten at Uncle Niall's the night before you went home, when we were coming back together from the lochan——'

'That? You thought none the worse of me for that. You had only just met me. You didn't chill on me because I lost my head.'

'Just as I wouldn't have thought any the worse of you had you brought things to a point at Roberto's.'

'You took mighty good care not to let me come within a mile of the point at Roberto's.'

'My answer would still have been no. I've never had the slightest difficulty knowing when I was in love, Bruce. And I've never been in love until I met John.'

'In a hotel corridor, or when you opened the door at 51 Mountview Street, top left, to him?'

Although the realisation that his brother felt more for him than Flora in his predicament did not make him any pleasanter towards John, it did make him feel downright unpleasant towards this girl sheathed in her love for another man.

Instinctively she realised Bruce's attitude had

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changed towards her, and involuntarily hers changed towards him.

'You think John has spoiled things for us, don't you, Bruce? But there was nothing to spoil. Even if there had been no John, I would never have loved you.'

'No? You gave a creditably sound performance of it.'

'I don't know what you mean by that. I always felt at home with you. But feeling at home with a person isn't the same as falling in love with him.'

'You should trot out the classic phrase that you like me as a brother and then the formula would be complete.'

As he realised that this was what he would be to her when she married John, a brother, he suddenly felt sick. Because he had had a bellyful of brothers these past few hours, enough to last him a lifetime.

He wheeled on his heel and left her in the room which contained everything nobody wanted but that had to be kept.

In the dining-room, as they waited for Flora to join them for breakfast, they listened to Bruce slam himself out of the house.

'Oh, John, you don't think he'll do anything to himself, do you?' their mother asked fearfully.

'I wouldn't think it's likely.' Lennie tried to comfort her by appearing casual to the point of flippancy. 'And John can't do anything about it.'

'Of course he can't,' said Mrs. Garnett, 'only—I never thought of you and Flora, John. If it were

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going to be anyone, I had thought it would be Bruce.'

She looked at her elder son as though seeing him with new eyes. She could not but be glad that happiness had come his way, even if it had to be happiness at Bruce's expense. John had always been what she termed to herself a redding-stroke man: one who would never hesitate to do something because he knew it to be unpopular, who would be the one to receive the blow when he tried to part two combatants. But when Flora entered, with the lustre of her good looks like an aura round her, the mother felt slightly bemused that her unspectacular eldest son had been the one to be chosen. John deserved good fortune, and she found herself sighing sharply; whereas Bruce was one of those who appeared to attract rather than merit it.

It was John, not Bruce, who accompanied Flora in the taxi. There struck her as something diabolic about the cavern of a station, echoing with screeches and hoots and banging with noise, because this was where they were to say good-bye. While John remembered this place, blacked-out during the war, where the pain of men saying good-bye to women and women to men could be felt like an actual presence.

He visited her mother in the nursing-home that evening, as he had promised, glad to be able to do something that linked him to Flora. She was reading when he entered, but put down her book when she saw she had a visitor. Bruce was right, John thought as he advanced towards the bed on which she lay, a pretty little wren of a woman, Flora was not in the least like her mother. The spindle side of the house

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had stamped her with its more definite implications. Where Flora shone, her mother twinkled.

John put the roses he had brought for her on her bed, where he hoped they would be overlooked until after he had gone.

'You must be John,' smiled Mrs. Mure, pulling the counterpane to bring his gift within her reach. 'Pink roses—how lovely.' Her pleasure was revealed on her face. 'Thank you so much. I know Bruce now, your mother, and Lennie, so you are the only Garnett I have to meet.'

'Yes,' he replied, 'I'm John. Mrs. Mure, Flora said I was to tell you,' at the jerkiness of his voice she looked up at him over his pink roses, 'she and I are engaged.'

He was well aware that this would come as a shock to Mrs. Mure, and wished he could have taken a little longer breaking it to her. She certainly was startled that what she had expected to be a casual visit should so rapidly develop into one of such significance.

'Are you? You and Flora? My dear boy, I'm so glad. It has come—as a little surprising, when I knew Flora had just met you. But she did talk of you yesterday, now I think of it. You returned home only the night before, didn't you?'

'Flora wrote you this letter,' he said, putting it into her hand. 'She told me to give it to you.' Of course he should have asked her to read Flora's letter there and then before he said anything, and thus allowed her daughter to break the news to her, instead of bungling it like this. 'I love her, Mrs. Mure,' he said, feeling the words halt and lame when

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he thought of all they had to carry. 'I want you to know that—I love her.'

'And she must love you—that I know, knowing Flora as I do. I'll save her letter until you leave, and thus spin you both out to the fullest. You'll have to visit us, John. At the end of this month? Ah, I shan't be home by then, I'm afraid.'

The longer he remained with her the more sure did he become, although his name was never mentioned by either of them, that Mrs. Mure liked Bruce better than him. Or rather, had Flora's mother been her daughter's age, he knew it would have been Bruce of the two of them with whom she would have fallen in love.

He felt almost relieved when the visit came to an end, and the knowledge that Mrs. Mure must feel the same deepened his relief. The park was closed for the night but he walked home by city pavements. In Mountview Street the houses, some lit up, some blinded out, looked like façades, with nothing behind their strips of fronts but windy emptiness. But everything outside them was very real, even inanimate objects like lamp-posts had the curious intensity of growth.

Some ten days later Ailsa Craig stood waiting for the morning papers to be thrust into the letter-box slot. That insufferable family upstairs, she had always felt them on top of her. Now it was their turn. What would they feel when they read in today's *Glasgow Herald* of her engagement to Alan Latimer? That announcement would pay off two old Garnett scores.

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Lennie would see it first, Lennie never missed anything. She would say, 'Listen to this,' and promptly read it out. And what would John feel? No one mattered to Ailsa but John. He was bound to feel a stab of regret, the pang of a not so distant past, recollections he could not quite smother.

She heard the boy at the door, the scraping sound as the papers came through the aperture. Swiftly she crossed the hall, returning with them to her bedroom. She opened the *Glasgow Herald* at its leader page, her gaze seeking out the column headed 'Social and Personal'.

She stood there, holding the wide newspaper open, her eyes pricking as she read. She had found not what she wanted, the announcement of her engagement to Alan, but something else. The insufferable family upstairs were still above her.

MR JOHN GARNETT AND
MISS FLORA MARY MURE

A marriage has been arranged and will shortly take place between John Garnett, elder son of the late Mr John Garnett and of Mrs Garnett, 51 Mountview Street, Glasgow, W 2, and Flora Mary Mure, only daughter of Mr and Mrs David Mure, Isle of Eicht, Argyll

Chapter Thirteen

HE asked in the village how to reach Rannick House. The grocer himself came to the door of the shop to point out the direction he should take, using his big ham-like hand to indicate up-hill and down-hill, curving it to impress on him a most important corner he must turn, and finishing up with, 'Then fair through until you come to the House gates.'

September was John's favourite month and to-day, with its high blue sky and windless air splendid with a hint of frost, his favourite type of day. A robin's notes splintered with their sweetness the evening brightness. He turned off from the highway where the grocer had graphically insisted that he must, taking a rutted road which led through the glen. The river flowed to his left, a typical Highland river, spreading through wide meadowland which it flooded when in spate, cascading over narrow gulleys, churning in pools amber with depth.

He drove his car slowly along the country road, not only because of the bumpiness of the surface but because he was in no particular hurry to reach his destination when there was so much pleasure to be had on the way. The red berries on tree and bush were bright as though they had been waxed.

He had come north on his rounds first this time, was spending to-night and to-morrow at Rannick, and on Monday would head south. After a night at 'The Flock Arms', he could make for home, settle up at the office, and on the Friday take Flora's train

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to Fort William, where he would catch the boat to Ericht.

Now that he was facing in the right direction, home, with the bulk of his travelling behind him, he felt peaceful as one already on the way, grateful to be spending the week-end at Rannick since that would fill in some of the time separating him from Flora.

Bruce had not spoken to him once since their quarrel. It had been a relief for John to leave home, particularly when the announcement of his engagement had appeared in the *Glasgow Herald* on the morning he had left. When he returned, it would be but for a night or two, and his absence would have slackened, at least for himself, the tension between him and his brother. He hoped before it could tighten up again that he would have left for Ericht.

Now he enjoyed dawdling along the country road in his car, taking as long as possible before he arrived that he could think of Flora. At this very moment she had walked to the end of the jetty and was standing there, thinking of him. The wind was blowing back from her face her hair the colour of white clover. His mind winged, stretched, swooped towards her, living for that moment when they would reach each other.

The gates of Rannick House were impressive, a Gaelic motto aswirl in their fine filigree. There was no lodge, so that he had to climb in and out of his car twice before driving it along the broad avenue, bordered with rhododendron bushes. The dwelling to which it led was not a mansion-house, but it was certainly important enough to make him feel conscious

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of the ordinariness of his small car as he drove it up to the doors. As Rannick had gates, so it had doors.

The air was filled with sound when he stood on the avenue, a sound that is only heard in the country, of water from the hurtling river some distance away, and of atmosphere, not of wind, for there was none. It was like a murmur, immeasurable as the sea heard in a shell clapped to your ear.

'How are you?' His host, benign, charming, debonair, was running down the steps to greet him. 'How good to see you.' As John felt him grip his hand, he knew he was thinking of the last time they had met, at his father's funeral, and gripped him back as though to thank him for remembering. 'Just leave your car—Albert will take it round to the garage and bring in your baggage. Beautiful day you've brought with you. No, you wouldn't see much havoc from the great gale, yet it ravaged the Mhorenick district. Strange how freakish it was. They counted the uprooted trees on Speyside in their thousands—'

What Bruce had described as his 'displaced' face, with its two different sides, made Niall Grant stand out in any company. There was scarcely a line on his face until he smiled, when they sprang from his eyes and were rays rather than furrows. His vitality had all the poise of the athlete with no nervous tension about it. He had taken life at the bound: it had not ploughed through him as it had through his contemporary, John's father.

He came into the hall when he heard their visitor come downstairs, to take him into the drawing-room for a cocktail. This was a drawing-room, no one would have described it as a lounge. Its walls were a

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curious green that went with nothing but its own shade and an egg-shell ivory. The green silk on the ivory chairs was fretted without being worn, the green curtains not drawn, so that the lights of the room were reflected in the glass of the french windows like moons, and one was conscious of the unseen landscape outside pressing against the panes. The incense-like fragrance of burning logs bore his mind back to the night he and Flora had had dinner together.

Mrs. Grant was one of those few women to whom age can do little. Tall, her figure had no unwieldiness, her hair still retained its fine texture and having once been fair the transition to whiteness was hardly perceptible. Seldom, thought John when he sat between them at dinner, could a couple have been so well matched as they, for the same resplendence seemed to shine upon them both.

Mr. Grant was going out that evening, to some meeting in the town hall which he felt he had to attend as it had been arranged for to-night to suit him. So that John found himself alone with his hostess in the drawing-room that was green as under the sea yet had the clarity of daylight.

'It would be a blow for Bruce when you and Flora fell in love,' she remarked, her face thoughtful.

No breaking of ice was needed with her: already he was on as intimate a footing as though she had known him all his life, perhaps more intimate because their meeting was not blurred by any earlier impressions.

'Yes,' he said heavily. 'It was a terrible blow. I don't think he'll ever forgive me.'

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'He will blame you—of course,' she said. 'That is only natural. Poor Bruce.' Bruce's brother felt her gaze stay itself upon him. 'Yet I think if I had known you both, I could have told which Flora would choose. I'm glad it's you, John.'

He watched the firelight shift over her face, bur-nishing its fairness. Unlike a dark woman, her face threw no shadows of its own.

'John,' she said, 'tell me about your father. At the end—did he suffer? Don't try to spare me. I must know the truth.'

Startled he stared at her, trying to adjust himself to what he had just heard, to the surge of feeling that deepened her voice. His father—why should this woman ask him about his father unless she had been—no, he corrected himself, still was—in love with him?

'My father,' he stumbled, 'you want to know what he died from.'

'I know what he died from.'

Their eyes met.

'They give them things to keep them under now-adays,' he said clearly. 'They gave him everything that they could.'

'Was he conscious—at the end?'

Nimble his mind worked; he knew he must lie.

'No,' he said, 'he wasn't conscious, Mrs. Grant.' He strove to gather for her any scraps of comfort he could find. 'He was at home all the time—he didn't want to go to a nursing-home or hospital. Everything that could be done for him was done—I can assure you of that.'

'I know it would be.' Her eyes were brilliant

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with the tears that never fall. 'I know that no one could have nursed him so devotedly as did your mother.'

That was why Mrs. Grant had invited him to Rannick—because he could speak to her of his father. It had been him, not Bruce, she had wanted to see. Coming at the tail end of the family, Bruce was too young to be in this story: with him, she would have to be the comforter, not the comforted.

'You knew my father when he was young,' John said ponderingly. He stated, did not ask questions. His contact with this woman had something disembodied about it, because they were meeting in a sphere where the past had all the pang of the present.

'I loved your father,' she returned. 'He was best man at our wedding because Guy Cunninghame at the last moment was unable to be there.' That was characteristic of his father, to fill another's place at the last moment, the type of man always chosen for a trustee. 'That was the first time I met him—on our wedding-day.' Her face flickered with her memories. 'After that, we met more than once—naturally.'

'He loved you, didn't he,' said John, no longer looking at her, and he thought of the lock of hair he had found in his father's pocket-book, hair with that sheen of gold about it that had not a trace of red, hair that might have belonged to Flora.

'I was prepared to give up everything for him,' the woman opposite him was saying.

Each revelation he heard was more staggering than the last. He could not piece it together, make a whole of it. That Flora Grant with a husband like Niall

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Grant could think of any other man baffled him, yet he knew such things did happen. But that the other man should be his father seemed little short of incredible.

He tried to think of his parent before his face had become despoiled with illness, before time had turned against him. From out of nowhere he remembered standing in a Glasgow station, holding his father's hand, after they had accidentally met Mr. Grant. The two men must have spoken, yet he had no memory of what they said, but he remembered to this day that meeting, with its flux of cross-currents so remote from his ken.

'He would never have agreed to that,' he heard himself say lamely; 'he would be thinking of you, and would never have allowed you to make so great a sacrifice.' From the material point of view alone, what had his father to offer her?

'No,' she replied, 'he wasn't thinking of me. He was thinking of you.'

'Of me?' he repeated, and again he stared at her, as though to find in her face some confirmation of her words.

'Yes, of you. You were his son. When it came to the parting of the ways, he found he couldn't leave you, and I couldn't ask him to do it.' She was smiling to him as if over the years. 'You called a thing that lived in a hole in the bathroom a gatgona, and thistle-down spinawinka.'

He looked at Mrs. Grant. The light fringe of hair across her brow gave her face a bland look. She remembered about him what he was sure his mother had long ago forgotten.

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His mother! She came into his mind with such precipitancy that she seemed to flood it. What hope had she to keep her husband's love with such a rival? There could be nothing negative between two women when the difference between them in itself had the clash of opposition. Even as he looked at Mrs. Grant his heart pulled for his mother.

What she must have been through when the love of his father for another woman had reached the stage that they had discussed going away together. For the first time John realised why there was a gap of ten years between him and Bruce. Little things he had not noticed at the time came back to him now, the stillness out of her whenever the name Grant was mentioned, her over-concentration on the day of their father's funeral. She had known that the woman her husband loved and who loved him would use his son as the only bridge she had to link him to her.

He felt in his breast-pocket for his father's wallet, removing the papers with which he had filled it, everything except the lock of hair he had found in the inner pocket. Then he passed it over to her.

'You'll remember that,' he said. 'You have it. I found—something of yours inside. I didn't know what to do with it, so I put it back where I found it.'

She sat with the worn pocket-book, limp with emptiness, in her hand. God, thought John, does the heart never break, and so finish with itself?

He heard someone outside the french windows, drumming on them with his fingers for entrance, and crossed the room to open them.

'It's a glorious night,' said Niall Grant, 'far too good to waste inside. Every star in the pack is out.'

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Won't you come, dear? Well, John, you and I should manage as far as the lochan.'

He woke on Monday morning and lay listening for the chirping sounds of the countryside, but nothing met his ears. When he looked out of the window, he realised why. Mist had soundlessly gathered during the night, dispersed its forces through the park, and clung to the nearest trees, turning them into outposts.

He left early, because he had a heavy day. 'When next you come,' Mrs. Grant smiled to him, 'you will have Flora with you.' The unseen Albert had brought his car to the door. As he drove down the avenue, he noticed every leaf and blade of grass had its grey lobe of moisture, and knew that had he been able to listen the sound of their falling was the only thing he would hear in this muffled stillness.

There was not a breath of wind to blow the mist away, and once on the road he saw its grey companies thicken round the river, file down the glen, and flank every hill. The undergrowth on either side of the road was so damp that the leaves were no longer their own hues: they, twigs, bracken, ferns and pine needles, were all stained the prune of mould.

'When next you come, you will have Flora with you.' To think that this day week he would be at Erich, that within four days he would be on his way to her. Every minute he was winding up more and more of the time that separated them. That was why he was glad he had a busy day in front of him, it would bring to-morrow all the quicker when he

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could think, 'Within three days—'

As he had to visit certain towns, he took the main routes, driving out of the ghostly mist into a smirn of rain which wetted his windscreen. He heard the companionable ticking of the wiper. The small rain beaded everything it fell upon. By the afternoon, when he was heading towards the Border, it ceased, and for the first time that day shafts of sun broke through the overcast sky, brimming the puddles on the roadway with watery light. He rather liked this hour of day when he met children on their way home from school. A little later he drove into that uncertain shine as though, when evening came, the earth tilted nearer the sky. By stepping on it, he had managed to do everything he had planned. He would arrive at 'The Flock Inn' in comfortable time for dinner, cross the Border to-morrow, where he would 'do' Carlisle, and complete his round on his way home.

Darkness had deepened out any detail in the featureless landscape, and left only the form of a rounded hill and the long ridge revealing the lie of the land, but there was still a glimmer in the sky when he arrived at the hotel. It looked compact and self-contained as it bulked against the horizon, its unembellished outline the same as it had always been. The only landmark on the bare road, it stood out with the finality of a milestone.

He drove his car round to the back, where it might have been midnight, for the courtyard shut out that part of the sky that still glimmered. His headlights only served to make inkier everything outside their immediate vicinity. It was a darkness with some excitement in it, as though it were Hallowe'en.

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As he pushed open the garage door, he computed idly when Hallowe'en would be—in about a month's time. Before he climbed into his car to drive it into the garage he remembered to take out his suit-case.

It was so heavy that he found he could not move it. It must have caught on something. He tugged at it to free it.

He put up his hand to his throat, as though he felt something there. But before he could wonder what it was, he had again that feeling of complete awareness that he had once had before.

Undefeatable life beat through him like a pulse and he felt powerfully strong. He knew it was the following wind but this time he was facing it. He was sure he greeted it with a shout as he felt it encompass him like wings. No longer did he need even to lean back.

At the end of the long passage from the kitchen, Miss Saunders stopped short.

'Now that's a funny thing,' she said aloud.

Ella, the maid, found her still standing there when, a moment or two later, she emerged from the kitchen with a laden tray.

'Did you speak, Miss Saunders?' she asked.

'Yes,' said Miss Saunders. 'I said that was a funny thing. Do you know, I could have sworn I saw Mr. Garnett standing in the doorway—just where I saw him in spring. Only he really was there then.'

'He's not there now,' confirmed Ella, looking flatly at the doorway. 'Nobody is.' She made for the dining-room. 'I thought I heard someone at the

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garage a whiley back,' she remembered to say as an afterthought, 'but if it had been Mr. Garnett he'd have been round by now.'

Miss Saunders stood as though still listening to what she had said after Ella had disappeared. Then she began to walk towards the front door. Her footsteps quickened as, once outside, she turned the broad gable end of the building. They were running by the time she reached the courtyard.

Chapter Fourteen

A TERRACE house in town, the manse had nothing to distinguish it from its neighbours. Bruce picked it out solely because he had looked up its number in the telephone directory. He was shown into what was obviously the doctor's study, a room forbidding with books. It was early in the morning, and when he crossed the hall he had smelt the pleasant warmth of toast. In an upstairs room someone was using a sweeper, and through the wall, in the house next door, a piano played. His senses concentrated on these sensations, as though staking claims for sanity.

The door opened almost soundlessly because of the thickness of the carpet and Dr. Gentles entered.

'Hullo, Bruce,' he greeted him, 'you're early afoot this morning surely.'

'Dr. Gentles,' rasped Bruce, 'isn't it ghastly? John's dead.'

All colour drained from the ruddiness of the minister's face, and Bruce saw him feel for a chair on which to sit down.

'I'm sorry,' he stammered, 'I shouldn't have broken it to you like that.'

The older man made no reply, and Bruce watched him sitting there, with his vigorous head half turned from him. For the first time in his life he was seeing someone in the round, as he was, uncoloured by his, Bruce's, opinion of him.

Dr. Gentles of course must be ancient history, as old as their father, although he might not look it. Memorials to the dead of two wars hung in his church

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which Bruce never entered. A man could not live to be his age without having come through something, at least not a man like Dr. Gentles who had never changed his course.

Perhaps because the minister had spoken about a ship the last time they had met, perhaps because his profile was not unlike a ship's figurehead, but Bruce as he looked at him was reminded of a boat. Yet he knew his words had acted not like an onslaught upon a vessel that was weathered, tempered, to come through storms, but had affected him as though John were his son. And Bruce had treated him like a shock absorbent.

'He was on his rounds,' he said huskily. 'Last night he went to Flock—that's a small place on the Borders. The hotel proprietress phoned up to say he had been taken desperately ill and his brother must come at once. Lennie was in when the call came through. Tom Ritchie,' Bruce was engulfed with his own words, struggling with them, as they carried him further and further to sea, away from the man in the chair, 'he's John's friend, Lennie's engaged to him'—if he told him these meaningless little details it would postpone the inevitable—'motored me down.' He saw in his mind's eye the inn with its weather-bitten stone: he felt as though he would always see it. 'John had been dead all along. The proprietress had found him, slumped over his suitcase, outside the garage.'

Still the minister did not speak. And Bruce knew that John's death had been to him, because of past experiences, like the death of a whole generation, while his compassion plucked the dead man out of

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his generation, apart from his family, as he remembered John as he was himself.

'Dr. Gentles,' Bruce said urgently, as if recalling him, 'for God's sake help me. Say something to me. I know nothing, absolutely nothing,' and he covered his eyes with his hands as if to shut out something.

The car began its winding journey downhill. Bruce saw Tom's hand make mechanically for his cigarette-case.

'Don't, Tom,' he stopped him.

'I can't make head or tail of it,' said Tom, looking out of first one window, then the other, 'it just doesn't make sense. Not John. Why, he's younger than I am.'

He sat opposite Bruce and Flora's father. The Garnetts had asked the Grants to break the news to Flora, and she and her father had only managed to arrive that day in Glasgow, in time for the funeral.

'Was it his heart?' asked Mr. Mure. He was a big man with the frame of one who had once been burly but whom the years had made sparer. This attenuation was noticeable even in his skin, as though his sheath had worn thinner, through which his veins showed blue. His face was as unwrinkled as in his youth, but there was nothing boyish about the man who gazed out of it. Accustomed to years of living on a lonely island, this sudden projection amongst strangers, into a city, had the effect of completely bemusing him, so that his reactions were all slow as he tried to attune himself to the different tempo and adjust himself to the unfamiliar.

'No,' said Bruce, 'it wasn't his heart. He was

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wounded during the war, he got badly crushed, and was ill for a time when he came home at first; but everyone thought he had come all right. He did himself. But Dr. Lauder knew he had aneurism of the aorta.'

He did not think of the man beside him as the man who should have been his future father-in-law, already he was in Bruce's mind John's father-in-law, just as his thoughts of Flora no longer held anything personal. There was no room for himself in 'his world jettisoned of everything but experience. When he had seen her at the service in the house that day, it had been of John he had thought, not himself. The one bond he now had with Flora Mure was John.

He stared out at the passing scene, to be reminded, if he had needed any such reminder, of the last time he had made this identical journey. He had shared the car alone with John then. His brother's voice reached him from the past with the insistency of a message, 'Pop wouldn't want us to carry it like a burden into the future.' All the men who had been at their father's funeral had been at John's, as though the older generation remembered again the father by paying tribute to the son, their number increased by John's friends. Bruce had not realised how many there were of these until he recollected each as he shook hands with them at the end.

Lennie let them in when they arrived back at the flat. Bruce knew their visitors would congregate in the sitting-room. He went into the small dining-room to find his mother.

'You're back, dear?' she said, trying to keep her voice even.

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'Yes,' he answered, 'we're back.'

As she heard him say what John had said, the strings of her heart seemed to pull themselves out by the roots, that never again would they feel what they felt now.

Bruce searched for something, anything, to say that would carry some comfort. To his surprise he found he had not far to search, it was at hand.

'It was a nice service, mother—Dr. Gentles took it well. I like him, don't you? I remember John once said to me he knew what he was talking about. It's a peaceful old graveyard.'

'Yes,' she agreed, 'you like to think of him there. There's something so safe about the country.' With an effort, she tried to dislodge her mind from the tilt of time and the swoop of death. 'We'll just have to remember, Bruce, that he might have been killed when he was wounded, or died in the hospital out there. We have had these years in between, just as he had. He's at Drumban, not in a war grave.'

Silence laboured between them as their own thoughts accumulated round them. His mother's eyes were swollen and red with weeping: there had been a wildness about her grief for her eldest son that had startled both Lennie and Bruce. She had not been like this when their father died, and they knew what their father had meant to her. What they did not know was that she had spent a lifetime saying good-bye to him, so that when the final break did come she was wellnigh inured to it.

Tom followed Lennie into the kitchen as she went to make tea. He sat on Mrs. Boag's chair at the wooden table.

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'I just can't make it out,' he said. 'I don't see what it means. Not John. Why, he's younger than me.'

It was what she had heard him say over and over again since it had happened. As she passed behind him, she bent and brushed his baffled forehead with a kiss. She wore the ring he had given her on her left hand: their engagement was to have been a surprise for John on his return. It eased something in her that Tom came to her for healing instead of feeling he must strengthen her. She realised he would always turn to her thus, as though she had the answers.

Perhaps why she loved Tom Ritchie was because he was such a real person. He was hedged-in neither by pretension nor inhibition, but stood for what he was, himself. And she had lived long enough to know that those who are themselves are perhaps the rarest of all to find. He had about him all the unusualness of the usual. So that when she looked into his broad face she did not see its ordinariness, but a face she loved to watch his smile scamper across.

In the sitting-room, where she stood in the bay formed by the windows, Iris's most secret thoughts came and went as the lamp of her mind glanced upon them. She was so accustomed to over-dramatising life that when drama did overtake her it took the form almost of reaction: the rehearsal had acted reality off her stage. Now her black clothes made her appear even more petite, so that she looked small, ardent, gallant, as she faced the world with her great wells of eyes.

She could not tell what effect she had had on Alan Latimer when he saw her at the service: she did not greatly care what it was as long as he was affected

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by her. And she was not sure that he had been. He, of course, was going to marry Ailsa Craig, the girl who lived below them, who had once been engaged to John. Iris considered Alan and Ailsa were well matched: they would just be like any other couple, she the wife to his husband. Alan looked solid enough and stolid enough to have been married for years.

Even he must have spared her a thought when he saw her to-day. Few could have come through what she had come through, she who had lost her husband, her father and now her favourite brother in a matter of months. John would never mean to Lennie or Bruce what he had meant to her. It had always been Iris and John in the old days, just as it had been when she had returned home, a widow; only they seemed to have changed places then, he to be the older, because he had become the head of the family. As though Bruce could ever fill John's place, be to anyone what his brother had been.

That girl whom John had been going to marry—Iris could understand anyone falling in love with her, as she could understand anyone falling in love with John, now glorified in her mind as her beloved brother who was dead. What she could not understand was Lennie and that Ritchie man; Lennie who, after all, was more fastidious than Iris had ever been. Yet she had engaged herself to someone who might be, Iris was sure he was, the nicest soul in the world; but no one could deny, and Iris would have thought Lennie the last to deny it, that the nicest soul had a Glasgow accent you could cut with a knife.

He simply did not make the Garnett grade, yet Lennie, a Garnett of Garnetts, was engaged to him.

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He had, of course, given her a magnificent ring; not that he had money to throw about, he gave Iris the impression of having come from a careful home, but because nothing was too good in his eyes for Lennie. Queer the twists life took; he would step into John's post now. Someone else trying to fill John's shoes who would never come within miles of him.

John would not have left a will—no one made a will at his age. She should not be thinking of things like that on his funeral day, but she was. John would understand, John always understood, she could say anything to him. Because he had died without making a will, what he left, his estate they called it, would be shared out between his next-of-kin. She had not received her rightful due from her father: after all, she was the eldest of the family, an uncontested fact everyone seemed to overlook: but no one could deprive her of her share of John's. He would rather she had it than anyone, he knew how things were with her, the only one who had taken the trouble to find out that she had lost everything.

She moved over to the fireplace when Lennie brought in tea, which their mother began to pour. Iris remembered the firelight flickering on the beautiful plain silver, the delicate china, the fine tea-cloth in the days before the war. Oh God, thought that part of her that for ever waited in the wings, that never picked up its cue, take me back, take us all back, to those days—don't allow what has happened to happen.

'You and I will share this little table,' she smiled to Mr. Mure, busily looking after him. 'You've been so tactful although you may not know it—you've put

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your saucer exactly over the burn I made once upon a time with a cigarette!’

‘Have I?’ He removed his cup and saucer to inspect. ‘So I have. I don’t see why it should be covered up—it’s quite a decoration.’

A captivating creature, he thought, how alive she was. They were all alive, vibrant as bows at the top of their bent.

A feeling of complete bewilderment washed over him as he sat in this tall town room which did extraordinary things to voices, although no one but he seemed to hear how extraordinary they sounded. A month ago he had not known of the existence of his future son-in-law, to-day he had attended his funeral. He thought of Flora as she had looked when she told him of John, and he thought of her when Niall Grant had arrived, unheralded, on the island to tell her of his death. The frustration of the old filled him like a weariness because he could not bear for her the heart-break.

He tried to visualise what the son-in-law he had never seen was like, dark as the Iris sister, apart like the Lennie one. His gaze drifted to where Bruce stood behind his daughter at the window, and in the effort to force John Garnett into reality he thought of him as even bigger than the younger brother, more than life-size.

Flora and Bruce looked out at the plains and pastures of the sky, across which the wind shepherded clouds white as snow-geese.

‘I remember,’ Bruce said suddenly behind her, ‘something John once said—it has just come back to me.’

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'Do you, Bruce?' There was an ache even about her patience: he knew she could scarcely bear to breathe lest he forgot what it was. Every memory of John, his people, his home, were like life-lines she clung to with the tenacity of desperation.

'Yes, about the following wind. Dr. Gentles made out each of us had it, something behind us that couldn't fail. I've never felt it myself, but I remember later on John telling me he had. He said it was unmistakable. He said you felt just as though you were being accompanied.'

'Did he, Bruce?'

'Yes. It was looking at these clouds up there that made me remember.'

As a child John must have stood here and watched the untethered sky pass. His words came back to her, 'The scale's correct here—seven-eighths sky, one-eighth earth.' He was hopped now in the one-eighth of earth, she would never see him again.

Everywhere she looked, everything she saw reminded her of him. She could not feel except her feelings first flowed through her feeling for him. Her love for him impregnated her being: so long as she drew breath, he had life—for her.

She looked up at the luminous expanse of the sky—another sphere, the heavens, firmament, eternity for ever sailing above the earth which, so far below, was hollow as a grave, rooted with shadows. Edged with light, the clouds flew before the pursuing wind.